

Sermon, Proper 16, 21st Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

‘And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”’ (Luke 13:11-12)

As my father entered into the last months of his life, he was increasingly bedridden, at one point recovering from pneumonia. A consequence of lying down for a long period of time is that one can lose a natural center of gravity. Attempts to stand upright can lead to a feeling of extreme vertigo. During one of my visits a physical therapist came by to help my father overcome this so he could be as mobile as possible. I was so impressed with this young man’s kindness, patience, and strength. The PT had my father lean over in bed and place his head directly against this man’s chest as if he were a small child. Using straps, the PT could then securely hoist my father to his feet. I could sense my father’s trust in this young man. Practicing standing upright for short periods helped restore my father’s balance so he could continue to get out of bed and use his wheelchair. While my father was still on his feet he used to encourage his neighbors to walk with shoulders back to maintain their posture.

The Great Litany has a powerful bidding concerning *standing*. To stand is not merely a physical act. It is an ancient way to approach God is prayer, especially the prayer of praise.

“That it may please thee to strengthen such as do stand; to comfort and help the weak-hearted; to raise up those who fall; and finally to beat down Satan under our feet,
We beseech thee to hear us, good Lord.” (*Book of Common Prayer*)

One of the wisest pastors I know is the Rev. Dr. Randy Wilburn. I first got to know him when he served as an interim at my home parish. Later he became my mentor when I had my field education year at Trinity Episcopal in Ware. The Gospel passage for today also brought back a memory of a brief homily Pastor Randy gave during a midweek healing service. He recalled a visit he made to a hospital patient while he was a young chaplain intern. The patient was lying in a prone position, face-down in special hospital bed that could be rotated, perhaps recovering from spinal surgery. Pastor Randy was not sure how best to have a conversation with this person as he could not readily see the person’s face. Then I found myself holding my breath, because somehow I knew what he was going to do next. He decided to lie down on the floor underneath the patient’s head.

This is what Christ would do. In whatever contorted positions we find ourselves in, Jesus sees us, attends to us, and lifts our spirits. Jesus can and does meet us right where we are, yet does not leave us there. Sometimes the smallest

details in a scriptural passage can reveal something about how God interacts with us. When the bent-over woman appears, it says, “When Jesus saw her...” This was not a passing, cursory glance. The Greek word for ‘saw’ has the sense of discerning clearly—and by extension “to attend to.” Jesus takes in the whole of the woman’s condition with a compassionate gaze. That in itself can be healing: knowing that someone sees beyond the immediate, surface consequences of our condition, no matter how bowed down or immobilized we are.

God tells Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you...” (Jeremiah 1:5) In the Psalm we hear this confident declaration, “Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb...” (Psalm 71:6) This same idea is found in Psalm 139 that says, “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.” (Psalm 139:13) For eighteen years this bent-over woman has been in a kind of forced fetal position. With Jesus’ healing of her body and spirit, has she not experienced rebirth? Is it any wonder that she responds as the Psalmist does with praise and rejoicing?

This particular healing story reveals the essence of what the Sabbath means, both in Jesus’ time and in ours. Once again Jesus shows us the spirit of the law, not merely the letter of the law. The illustration Jesus gives of work animals being untied so they may be led to water even on the Sabbath is one that his hearers would understand. Water is essential to life. Moreover, one’s ox or donkey is not to

bear any burden on the way to the water. Are we not to be “untied” so that we, too, may be led to the water of life that God offers us?

Jesus tells the woman that she is *free* from her ailment, asking, ‘...Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?’” He says this even before laying hands on her, before she finds that she can stand straight. It is this truth that makes her healing inevitable. With a simple declaration Jesus invokes God’s salvific actions on behalf of his chosen people in the form of the Exodus from Egypt. The Sabbath is God’s gift to us so that there is time to rest in that reality.

This saving work of God continues with Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. What more beautiful illustration of this than to see someone formerly bent over, oppressed by a spirit of weakness, now able to lift up her hands in praise? As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, it is the weak and foolish who show us the way, not the strong. (1 Corinthians 1:27) For a long time, I have thought of Sabbath, of Sabbath time, as a landscape, an environment into which God invites human beings. God created the Sabbath; the Sabbath is part of Creation. One of the beautiful things about the Sabbath is that it is not just rest for us, it is rest for our families, our neighbors, for all living beings: it is how we live. The Sabbath underlies our covenantal relationship with God. It is not simply a day, or a few hours out of a day.

The American poet Wendell Berry says this about the Sabbath: “We are to rest on the sabbath..., I have supposed, in order to understand that the providence or the productivity of the living world, the most essential work, continues while we rest. This work is entirely independent of our work, and is far more complex and wonderful than any work we have ever done or will ever do. It is more complex and wonderful than we will ever understand.” (Berry, *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems*, p. xx) Here are a few stanzas from his Sabbath collection from 1979:

“What stood will stand, though all be fallen,
The good return that time has stolen.
Though creatures groan in misery,
Their flesh prefigures liberty
To end travail and bring to birth
Their new perfection in new earth.
At word of that enlivening
Let the trees of the woods all sing
And every field rejoice, let praise
Rise up out of the ground like grass.
What stood, whole in every piecemeal
Thing that stood, will stand though all
Fall—field and woods and all in them
Rejoin the primal Sabbath’s hymn.”

From 1979. Berry, Wendell. *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (p. 15). Counterpoint Press. Kindle Edition.

