

PROPER SIXTEEN, PENTECOST 11, YEAR C, AUGUST 21, 2022

Today's gospel is a story of a bent over woman who had this ailment for 18 years. It is an ailment that many women still suffer from today especially in very poor countries. Imagine walking around bent over where your head barely rises above your knees. Constant pain, mobility issues, dependency and isolation are your everyday life. Yet this woman walked every Sabbath to the synagogue to worship and she was there that day listening to Jesus when he called her to him. Interestingly, she did not go to the synagogue for healing. It was Jesus who saw her and called her to him and placed his hands on her and told her she was free from her ailment. It is a welcome blessing to her but not to all who were in attendance. Immediately Jesus is taken to task by the leader of the synagogue for healing her on the Sabbath.

The story is simple yet beautiful and steeped with so many levels of meaning. If we first look at Jesus healing on the Sabbath, we know this is not the first time Jesus has done it. Yes, he provoked the leader of the synagogue by disobeying the law which the leader held as sacred and the leader is indignant not because Jesus healed a woman, but because he broke the rules to do it. But before we become too dismissive of the leader remember, to the Jews the Sabbath meant not just a day of rest, but a day to reconnect with God. It is a day filled with promise of God's peace and freedom and to look to God for comfort and that's what they believed took precedence over everything else – hence all the rules. The problem, however, is when religion becomes so rigid supposedly in the name of God, it often times does no good in fact, it does great harm.

Jesus, on the other hand, was simply trying to transform their idea of Sabbath. If the purpose of Sabbath is to be free to praise God, Jesus deems it necessary to free a bound woman so she can do precisely that. The religious leader isn't mean-spirited; he's trying to press his case for obedient faithfulness. And so is Jesus. They both want to observe the Sabbath, but they don't agree about how to keep it. He speaks out against those who in the name of religion harbor an unimaginative, unloving religiosity that is more intent on following the letter of the law than in recognizing where God is at work in the lives of people. It is important to keep the Sabbath, to allow time for God, but not by becoming indifferent to God's concern for humankind.

God loves unconditionally. That love comes first. Jesus is not rejecting the Torah rulings. He is interpreting them. If you are allowed to look after your domestic animals on the Sabbath, he counters, then surely this "daughter of Abraham", this faithful Jewish woman, deserves to be healed even if it is on the Sabbath.

The clash here is really over what it means to 'know God.' The God the leader knew wants to be the center of Sabbath attention, honored for goodness and might, and left unbothered, for one day a week, by human concerns. In essence give God a rest.

The God Jesus knew wants us to care for one another, always. Even on the Sabbath. To do all the good we can. Jesus cuts to the chase saying this is an opportunity for good to be done.

What the leader misses is the heart of the Sabbath which is compassion. The kind of compassion that surpasses legalism every single time. The kind of compassion that doesn't cling to orthodoxy simply for orthodoxy's sake. The kind of compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, the broken spirit before it sees the broken commandment.

This story — like so many Gospel stories — illustrates a basic truth about God's kingdom: the kingdom doesn't care about our timing, or our sense of etiquette, or our obsession with propriety and decorum. The kingdom cares about love. It cares about love NOW.

Jesus says the time for salvation isn't tomorrow; it's right now, no matter what day it is. So maybe Sabbath is the perfect time for healing! Jesus models the kind of compassionate action which a genuine relationship to God looks like. God's love does not play by the rules of formal religion. Rules do not regulate God. The ruler in the synagogue did not understand that. So, in his act of healing, Jesus showed the people what the reign of God was like, not just through words but action, too.

But let us shift gears and take a closer look at the woman who was bent over. As I said, she had not come seeking healing. Her healing was initiated by Jesus. This is an important point to note. First, he recognizes and calls her a daughter of Abraham which is a big deal for a woman who has been an outcast. By doing this Jesus links this woman to all those who received the promise God made to Abraham and affirms her right to be a full member of the community. He is also telling everyone she is a person of worth.

I love the picture on the front of your bulletin that shows Jesus bending over to look at this woman at her level and in her eyes. It was painted by Barbara Schwarz, a Dominican nun. We don't know if Jesus actually did this but I think it's a wonderful image to embrace because it shows how Jesus comes to us to help us with our own burdens.

I think this woman represents so many of us. All sorts of burdens weigh us down. What burdens do you bring with you this morning? Is it divorce; the loss of a loved one; financial worries; poor health; a child or grandchild who's in trouble. Are you bent over with all the worries and cares of life, or do you suffer under a burden of oppression, or are you burdened with the what if's and why did I's of life or are you just plain weary of all the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual ailments life has thrown at you.

What this painting shows is that Jesus is right there with us, looking into our eyes and into our souls. Jesus sees deep into our need, sees what sometimes we cannot even see ourselves, that our anger at other people is so often really anger at ourselves, that we're often afraid to look inside ourselves because we know there's a lot of garbage there that we'd rather not deal with. He sees the hurts we have suffered over the years — the rejections, the disappointments, the betrayals, the failures, the losses, the fears. He sees the ugly stuff inside us — ugly things others have done to us, ugly things we have done to ourselves, ugly things we have done to others, ugly things that were nobody's fault, but just happened. Jesus sees all that and lifts us up and restores our dignity, our worth but most of all hope.

Now, think about all the people in the wider community who are bent over in spirit, people whose voices are been stifled and whose choices are been taken from them, people who are trapped and crippled by the effects of physical ailments, disabilities, abuses or mental illness. In the same way that Jesus bends over to look into our eyes, we too need to look at those in our community who are in pain of some kind. Do we see other people's pain around us like Jesus does or do we avoid them not wanting to get involved or just miss them entirely.

Our hearts may be touched by the suffering of another, but are we moved to compassion, enough to reach out and do something? We need to hear and heed the call of Christ to break out of our old comfortable way of seeing things and doing things; we

need to look at the world with the fresh eyes of Jesus, we need to look at the world as a place filled with opportunities to bend the rules in the name of love.

What Jesus' primary concern was that we should love and care for one another and that changes everything. It is no longer about following rules that do no good. It is about transforming God's world. It is about love. Love heals. Love forgives. Love sets us free to be everything that God calls us to be. That is amazing grace.

May we become a part of the dream of God's kingdom that frees all of God's children, including ourselves, from whatever burdens that hold us back so that we will see our lives, our world as they can be for God has given us a future and a hope. Amen.