

Wrong Person, Wrong Time, Wrong Place?

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Is something weighing on you this morning? Bending you over with worry, care or fear, perhaps? Distorting your life? Twisting in you? I think all of us run into times in life when we are worn and bent. The Gospel we read today is for us.

Like all the stories of healing in the Holy Scriptures, it is a beautiful story of in and of itself. It also has many levels. It's more than a beautiful story of the healing of one person. And I ask you to listen for those levels as I speak. Let's start, however, with the first level, the healing of one person: the woman bent over for 18 years.

It touches me that Jesus saw this woman. He noticed her. Then, called her to him. By all standards of the time the woman in the story is a wrong candidate for notice and attention. "Bent over" describes not only her physical state but also her situation, her place in the culture. Then, as today, a misshapen form isolated one from others. Then, it was attributed widely to sin or to demon possession. Today, we may tell ourselves we have put a wide distance between ourselves and such antiquated notion, but let's admit that we suffer from the well known syndrome, "blame the victim."

So not only was the woman isolated by her physical condition, she was also virtually invisible as a woman alone. Unlike others we read about in Scripture, women and men, she did not try to attract his attention. She did not call out to him or reach out for him – maybe she had grown resigned to her condition and the isolation that went along with it. No, she did not importune him. Rather, he noticed her and called her to him. He crossed the barrier of gender and disability. He entered her loneliness and brought her back into community by calling her over to him. This is important: he set her free, liberated her to stand tall and straight as an equal in the company gathered to praise God. More about this in a minute.

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A synagogue ruler/leader of the time of Jesus had an important function. The synagogue of this era was the custodian of Jewish identity. In much the same way, local Christian congregations are the custodians of Christian identity. The faith is always one generation away from extinction. Local congregations are called to cherish it, teach it to those coming along behind and practice it so that it retains its vigor.

The synagogue leader was to see to it that the law was faithfully read, faithfully taught and faithfully observed in the synagogue. He knew pretty much everything written in the law about observing Sabbath. "Six days you shall work," the Lord said to Moses, "but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and harvest time you shall rest." Over the centuries this ancient declaration had been defined and redefined and defined

again – then refined and annotated and otherwise expounded upon until there was a vast corpus of written and received material about Sabbath. All this, with the admirable goal of helping the daughters and sons of Abraham to observe Sabbath. But in the process, all this had become cumbersome, convoluted, sometimes contradictory. Something like our tax law, I imagine. And the rules, refinements and requirements for adequately observing Sabbath frequently took on a life of their own, more importance than the reason for their existence: rest in the Lord through praise and thanksgiving.

A somewhat simplistic analogy to the situation in our time might be the well known case of the interim rector of a parish, who followed a beloved long-term rector. The beloved long-term rector in his latter years suffered from a condition that caused him to shuffle when he walked. Because the chancel of that particular church was carpeted, parishioners – especially in winter – often sustained mild static shocks when he handed them the wafer at communion. He had adopted the practice of touching the metal container that held the wafers to a radiator conveniently located along the wall close to the communion rail. So, what the congregation saw was their rector returning to the head of the rail, turning to his left, bowing and then starting down the rail. What he was doing was leaning over to touch the container to the radiator, hoping that would dissipate the charge that had built up as he shuffled from the end of the line back to the beginning. And soon this reason for what he was doing got lost.

As we are wont to do – the congregation watched the interim rector closely in his first weeks and months with them. Most people liked him well enough – he frequently preached to their liking; he pastored them compassionately as they mourned the departure of the beloved long-term rector, he led adult forums willingly. He was kind to the children, and he was open and friendly with them. Really, everything was as fine as it could be in an interim – well, not everything. Without any explanation he had changed the liturgy. At Communion, as he started down the line to give people the wafer, he omitted the requisite turn to the left and the bow to God that always preceded distribution of the wafers.

Just so did Jesus in the synagogue omit the requisite ritual observance of Sabbath, when he seemed to defy the ban against work in order to free the woman to rejoin the community. In the mind of the synagogue rule, she could wait one more day, a week and a day, if need be. Jesus could free her on any other day of the week. It was the will of God that the Sabbath rest be observed the way it was always observed, according to the rules, laws and conventions:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt
and the Lord your God brought you out from there
with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore
the Lord your God commanded you to keep Sabbath
day. [Deut. 5:13]

Our synagogue ruler knew what ought to be done. And it was the same yesterday, today and tomorrow – no matter that the kingdom of heaven was shining in the midst of us right here, right now, right around Jesus and this woman.

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Especially in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus makes a habit of turning what ought to be done on its ear. The Sabbath is emphatically not the wrong time for the work of release and liberation. The synagogue is emphatically not the wrong place for the work of release and liberation on the Sabbath. And this woman is emphatically not the wrong person to be released. It is curious, but human, that the ruler of the synagogue, who stands for the religious establishment of his time, and holds a mirror up to people of faith in our own time, curious that we forget that the founding event of the Judeo-Christian tradition is the exodus – the release from bondage in Egypt. And there is never, ever a wrong time, a wrong place, a wrong candidate for the work of liberation to go on.

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If you listen to FM 107.5, you may have heard the Baptist pastor who invites people to worship with a message that begins like this: “Did you know God loves you passionately? If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God carried a wallet, your picture would be in it. God brings you flowers in spring and” On he goes to invite the listener to join the congregation for worship.

I want to go there when I hear him. I believe his sunny and appealing message. And I believe that when we look behind the message, look down into its rich depth, we find Jesus, doing the hard work of freeing us to believe God loves us passionately. That’s what he did for that woman on that morning in that synagogue. And that’s what he is doing for us right now. Are you bent over? What is weighing on you? What is twisting in you? What is crooked about you? What is distorting your life? Jesus wants to free you from whatever it is. He is crossing whatever barriers isolate you from your God and from the community God loves. Jesus lays his hands on you and on me. He is calling us to him so that we can – we might choose not to, but we can – stand up straight and praise God by the way we live and move and have being.

One more thing: there is a synagogue ruler/leader who lurking in us all in my opinion. Jesus wants us to free of him and make us free of him as well. So listen to Jesus, not the synagogue ruler, read those Scriptures, pray with them – you know this – and when you do you’ll see that through Jesus’ grace-filled ministry you are made straight; you are liberated from isolation and confinement. You are linked with others into the community of the love of Christ. You belong to it, by your baptism, as surely as does anyone else. And you are free, we all are – free to love and serve our Lord and one another with joy. Amen.