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Pentecost 11

Luke 13:10-17

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Grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's such a privilege to be with you in some way today as part of the ELCIC summer sermon series. My name is Deacon Michelle Collins and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop for the Manitoba/Northwestern Ontario Synod. I give thanks for the wisdom and insight that all those who have participated in this series have brought, as well as for the many communities and individuals who have taken advantage of this resource in various ways this summer.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to Luke, the 13th chapter:

"Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And 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?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing"

This is the Gospel of our Lord.

“In our gospel reading today, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath and a woman who has been bent over for 8 years comes into the space. Maybe this was her first time there, maybe she was a regular that no one really noticed. But Jesus notices her. The text tells us that she was unable to stand up straight. Most scholars suspect this woman was suffering from a condition that was affecting her spine. But I wonder if we can broaden the possibilities of what was going on.

As someone who has been taller than most people around me for as long as I can remember, I know that standing up straight is just as much a matter of confidence in your identity as it is a matter of stature and stability. “Put your shoulders back,” I can hear my mother say. “Stand up straight.” For me, my tendency to slouch and keep my shoulders bent over in public was a result of incredible self-consciousness about my body. I didn’t feel I could stand up straight because of how I thought my height, hair, skin, clothes and shape compared to the common standard. This insecurity made me nervous to be in public, or to speak up, or to draw any unnecessary attention to myself. Maybe you could even say that while externally I was standing up straight, internally I was bent over by a spirit that had crippled me.

The reality is that our virtual and physical spaces are filled with people who cannot stand up straight for all sorts of reasons.

Some are bent over from physical disease and disorder.

Some are bent over from trauma they do not know how to process.

Some are bent over from prejudice and bias against various aspects of their identity.

Some are bent over from their age and what the common opinion is about what value they bring to the society.

Some are bent over from generations of internalized shame.

Our world is full of people who are bent over and unable to stand up straight.

Do you notice the difference between how Jesus responds to this woman and how religious people respond?

Jesus’ first word to the woman is a word of freedom and validation. “Woman,” Jesus says, “you are set free from your ailment.” Without a confession of faith or a certificate of confirmation, Jesus extends a word of invitation and freedom. Without hesitation, he includes her in the family of God by identifying her as a daughter of Abraham.

Can you imagine if we did this? Can you imagine if we created spaces where people who could not stand up straight in other places heard a word of freedom and inclusion from us? Child, you are free from your ailment. Refugee, widow, victim of trauma, gender diverse sibling...in this space you are free to stand up straight because we see you. You are welcome here. You are part of God’s covenant family.

Can you imagine? That’s what Jesus does. He sees and validates the woman, and declares a word of freedom that invites her beyond her previous sense of herself.

But how do the religious folk respond? Ummm...Jesus...that's not how we do it around here. We have rules and processes that dictate how someone like that is to be treated. We have classes for her down the hall. We have a support group for them that meets on Tuesday morning in the basement. We can direct her to services where she can get the help she needs. But she's interrupting our worship and learning, and we are not here for that.

The religious leaders' objection to both the woman and Jesus' response to her does sound a bit extreme, doesn't it?

And yet, that's so often how we respond to people who come into our spaces with qualities that make us uncomfortable and that keep them from standing up straight in our midst. We point back to the rules and procedures that have served us well, and assume they will serve others just as well. Maybe, if we're honest, we even expect God to abide by those rules and procedures.

But Jesus responds differently. He speaks to the woman and declares a word of freedom to her. He lays his hand on her—a gesture we know as a sign of blessing, anointing, prayer and proclamation.

Today, when an infant, child or adult is presented for baptism, the pastor lays hands on them and offers a word of promise. When someone goes through the rite of confirmation or the affirmation of baptism, we lay hands on them and offer a word of promise and prayer. When we commission someone into a particular role or opportunity, we lay hands and pray for them. In these and other times, when we extend a gesture of blessing and a word of promise and prayer, do we realize that we declare a word of healing, freedom and wholeness in the way Jesus did?

The religious leaders object to what Jesus is saying and doing because it goes against their rules—specifically their commitment to rest on the sabbath. They're not as upset that he healed the woman as that he did it on the sabbath. Jesus uses their argument against them. Today is for rest, you say? This woman cannot rest because of what is keeping her bent over. It is exactly the day of rest that compels me to heal her. We cannot say we value a day of rest when a person in our gathering is being excluded from that rest...even if we ARE following the rules.

We cannot say we value rest when those who are bound by disease, prejudice, oppression, inequality or our ignorance are excluded from experiencing rest. It is exactly our conviction about the sabbath—holistic, restorative shalom-type rest--that motivates our work for healing, release and justice. We cannot say we value rest when some among us are excluded from experiencing that rest because of something that is limiting their wholeness.

In this, Jesus' words and actions become not only about healing. They also become prophetic—convicting and revealing a system that prohibits and limits a full experience of God's intentions for God's people. In calling the religious leaders back to their own teachings and traditions, and by exposing the ways those traditions and teachings have become limiting, Jesus perhaps exposes that the woman is not the only one who is 'bent over' and 'quite unable to stand up straight.' In fact, the entire system needed to be restored so that EVERYONE can experience

rest—even the religious elite. Jesus’ words and actions call not just the woman but also the system towards freedom and release.

Our communities are filled with people bent over from a spirit that is crippling them. Our systems are bent over from attitudes and beliefs that are crippling them. Jesus desires and proclaims healing and restoration for both.

That’s where we come in.

In this season after Pentecost, we as a church lean into the impact and implications of the fire of the Holy Spirit anointing the disciples. We remember that the breath of God called the community of faith beyond its boundaries to hear and declare good news in different languages. This work of freedom and release that Jesus models is now ours. Most scholars accept that Luke and Acts are episodes in the same mini-series. So to understand the scope of the narrative it’s helpful to hold both books together. With that in mind, the story of Pentecost in Acts 2 parallels the story in Luke 4 where Jesus stands up in the synagogue—also on the sabbath--and reads from the prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Jesus thinks the passage is self-explanatory, but when he notices a sea of blank faces, he realizes he needs to connect the dots. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” he adds. His ministry—including healing this woman in our story today—is a demonstration of all the ways that the Isaiah passage continues to be fulfilled.

At the Feast of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit blows through the community, there’s a dramatic experience of tongues of fire and hearing the good news in multiple languages. The disciples are sent outside their comfortable and familiar boundaries with that same word of promise and hope that Jesus claimed in Luke 4—release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour. The work of God that Jesus embodied gets shared with the disciples, and now with us, and the Spirit continues to use flawed and faulty individuals and communities to share the good news with others today.

So in the season after Pentecost, we remember that we are called to proclaim all that God has done and continues to do to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. This is our work now. It is ESPECIALLY we who profess a commitment to a day of rest who are called to participate in making that rest possible.

...rest for children and youth burdened by limiting expectations and assumptions

...rest for marginalized communities exhausted by the burden of systemic injustice and generational trauma.

...rest for housing and food insecure neighbours exhausted by the burden of finding the very basic necessities for life.

...rest for those exhausted by the burden of labels, prejudice, hatred and exclusion.

...rest for those exhausted from working for justice, reconciliation, and equality for the most vulnerable

...rest for you and me, exhausted by the burden of grief, loneliness, shame, fear, and insecurity.

“Beloved, you are set free from your ailment.”

It is ESPECIALLY the systems, attitudes and beliefs that keep people, animals and all of creation bent over and unable to stand up straight that Jesus desires to transform.

Jesus saw the woman and declared transformation, healing and release to her as a manifestation of what adhering to a day of rest means. By the goodness and grace of God, we who are bent over in all kinds of ways are invited to experience this same kind of transformation, healing and release. Through the waters of baptism, we are washed and made clean, and are set free. Through the bread and wine of communion we are fed, nourished and forgiven, and are set free. As we gather with others and invite everybody to stand up straight and claim all of who they are and hope to be in our midst, we discover the vastness of God’s welcome and the fullness of God’s rest.

Whatever it is that’s keeping you bent over today, you are seen and loved by the One who knows your name and who stays by your side through the darkness of sin and death. You are seen and loved by the one who defeated the power of death so that you might hear the words “beloved, you are set free from your ailment,” and so that you can stand up straight and join the crowd in worship and praise.

As we continue to participate in the resurrection life of Christ, may we be communities that seek healing and wholeness for those who are burdened and bent over. May we reflect on our own systems, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours that have become limiting and are in need of transformation. And may we each hear for ourselves the incredible invitation to healing and wholeness.

Thanks be to God. Amen.