

“Healing on the Sabbath” – Rev. Jennifer Adams
August 22, 2010 – Proper 16C

One of the wonderful things about a story is that they have more than one side. That can be a frustration at times but for the most part, different sides of a story provide us with different angles, different perspectives, different ways in to its content and its meaning. Sometimes one story can even connect us to another story that helps break them both open a bit. And when the story is in the gospel different perspectives and connections provide us with different dimensions of good news, different ways to consider holiness, ways to think about and act toward God and neighbor. So this morning I’m going to look at the gospel story from a few perspectives. First From the angle of what Jesus did, the teaching and the healing that he provided on his visit to the synagogue. Then from the point of view of the leader of the synagogue and then finally from the perspective of the one who was the direct recipient of Jesus’ gift, the woman who was healed.

OK, the story itself. Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath, and just for the record (because it matters) this was the last time in Luke that Jesus would enter the synagogue to teach. And that matters because it’s part of how this story connects us to another; this passage invites us to remember the first time that any this happened. The first time Jesus was in the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach, (Luke chapter 4) he stood up, unrolled the scroll from the prophet Isaiah and proclaimed to his people that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him, “Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor,” Jesus said. “He has 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.” That was the first time he taught in the synagogue. And you can’t say that he didn’t give them fair warning. Today’s story echoes that first one but instead of simply reading from the scroll and proclaiming from the prophet as he did that first time, in the story we heard this morning Jesus actually did what he said he was going to do.

A woman who had been crippled for eighteen years was in the synagogue congregation that day. She was bent over, couldn’t stand up and when Jesus noticed her he said, “Woman you are set free from your ailment.” And then he touched her and he did his proclamation. He set her free. And he gave her hope. And he opened the eyes of all who were there that morning, whether they wanted to see or not. And then the woman stood up for the first time in eighteen years. And she praised God. And others did too.

But remember that this happened on the Sabbath which brings us to a different perspective because one of the commandments, another part of Scripture says, “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” Which for the faithful of Jesus day meant no actions, no work, no physical labor on that day; they were only to listen, to rest and to pray. And so while the woman and others were praising God the leader of the synagogue was “indignant and kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done. Come on those days to be healed.” The synagogue leader had just witnessed the religious law being broken and in terms of strictly keeping the faith as it was written, in terms of caring for “that which was of God” breaking the law was about the worst thing that could happen. And so he reported Jesus to the authorities.

But from Jesus perspective, bottom line was that healing trumped religious law no matter what. And so his actions that morning made the congregation wrestle, “What could be more holy than healing?” they had to ask themselves. “What could be more of God than setting someone free or releasing a captive, or opening the eyes of anyone who wants to see?” Unlike with the synagogue leader, from Jesus perspective doing those things was the fulfillment of what it meant to be of God.

Now there’s a lot there and so I encourage you to continue to chew on all of this but part of what Jesus’ perspective and his actions offer us is the freedom and the reminder to keep particular pieces of our tradition and Scripture in perspective. Scripture is inspired but it is not God. Law shapes us but it is not love. And healing and love trump all. And just like what happened to Jesus in the synagogue that morning, there are lines in Scripture that if followed to the letter can actually serve as roadblocks, they can get in the way of larger kingdom of God sorts of like healing and freedom and the ability to walk and to see. And actually keeping the Sabbath day holy is the least of our worries. History has proven that we can use Scripture to argue in favor of slavery. We can use Scripture to argue for inequalities, inhospitalities of all sizes and shapes. We can use Scripture to encourage hate which you’ve got to believe was not the original intention of the inspiration. Part of what this gospel story says is (like the bumper sticker I see around these days) love really can win, even when what it’s competing against is a passage from that which we consider holy.

Now let’s take one more step because the perspective of the woman who was healed helps tip this story even more. She had spent eighteen years unable to function without pain, without struggle without being able to stand up. She was

bent over, so she couldn't look up at the stars or feel the rain on her face or even make eye contact with those who reached out to her. And notice that she didn't ask Jesus for anything that morning. It wasn't the woman who broke the law. She was simply present. She came to worship to be with her people. To pray and maybe to rest. And then Jesus showed mercy. He loved her. In public. And it was against the rules. He touched her and healed her and so from her perspective it was probably the most surprising and humbling day of her life. Someone had crossed the line for her, challenged the authorities so that she could be whole, broken with tradition in order to welcome her in her wholeness into the fold. And it was humbling because that was something that she never could have accomplished alone.

And maybe some of you know what that's like. Maybe you're a woman who occasionally speaks up in church and you know that if generations before us had not challenged a couple of lines in Scripture and thousands of years of tradition you would still have to remain silent in here. Or maybe you are a gay or lesbian person who know those seven passages of Scripture all too well but you're also witnessing the healing and freedom as it comes from surprising places; God's love is opening eyes and hearts and possibilities every day. Or maybe you are someone who has slavery as a part of your ancestry and you know that it took brave souls to hold up the Scriptural promise of liberation against the Scriptural teaching to "be a good slave" in order to allow you to be free. And maybe if we all knew what it was like to have others reach out, risk out on our behalf, the world would be a better place. Maybe if we'd all experienced that larger vision of God's love trumping out all else we'd get it. Because then we'd know, we'd have to open our eyes and see that none of us does this alone. Ultimately it is mercy that gives us life. All of us.

The good news is that in Christ mercy has come. So there are showers that come every day that touch our faces and have the power to wash away eighteen years or even more of tears. There is touch that is the reaching out of the Body, helping us stand up even when the weight can feel so heavy. There are challenges that call forth our voices and beg our vision, our proclamation our trust. And there are congregations for whom the prophet Isaiah's words echo out every day. In word and in actions. We have been sent 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 favour. May we find the strength to be that presence in the church and in the world.

Amen.

