

Saint Anthony Park Lutheran Church  
13 Pentecost, 2010 (August 22)  
Isaiah 58.9-14  
Psalm 103.1-8  
Luke 13.10-17

*Almighty God,  
you have made us for yourself,  
and our hearts are restless  
till they find their rest in you;  
so lead us by your Spirit  
that in this life we may delight in your grace and live to your glory,  
and in the life to come enjoy you for ever. Amen.*

So there was a woman, and she was bent over and broken up. Had been bound in this painful and shaming way for eighteen years.

And Jesus called her over and healed her.

*Woman, He says, you are set free from your ailment.*

He laid his hands on her and she stood up straight, we're told, and began praising God.

And 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 - not on the sabbath day."

-Are you kidding!? Really?!?  
Hold on a minute.

If someone who had been suffering for nearly twenty years under an illness or an injury were to one Sunday be unmistakably and inexplicably healed in the midst of our worship - maybe somewhere between the confession and the *kyrie*, or right smack in the middle of the sermon. If Milt leaped from his chair and began dancing up the center aisle like a boy. If Wendell's heart were suddenly healed, or your arthritis. If Sigurd and Emma May surprised us with a waltz or a hollered hymn or a series of ecstatic cartwheels - would any of you be *indignant*?

Glenn - would you maybe be a little testy because now the service is going to go at least twenty minutes longer and you know we're going to hear about that?

Would you check your watches and tap your feet, wondering why this couldn't have been taken care of at a commission meeting or during a Wednesday dinner, when we didn't all have to be here?

Are you kidding?

Everything would stop. We'd be amazed. We'd weep. Some of us would be scared. There would be laughter and joy and O my God's and Hallelujahs. Someone would start singing, probably. We'd be shocked. Surprised. Overawed. creeped out, perhaps. Skeptical or rational, but amazed anyhow. Waiting for the next shoe to drop, maybe, but I daresay none of us would be indignant in the same way it seems this synagogue leader in our story is. Quoting exodus to argue while pointedly ignoring the woman's wonder and joy. Not even, you'll notice, taking on Jesus directly, but shooing and scolding the rest of the rabble. Out of sorts because Jesus was such a scofflaw when it came to the sabbath and the rules about work.

*There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the sabbath day.*

In the face of the Jesus whom Luke has spent twelve and half chapters documenting as messiah. Before this mighty miracle of healing that is flown like a big Perkins-sized flag in front of the incredulous crowd, the indignant response of the appointed official is self-evidently ridiculous. It's laughable. It makes no sense.

And that's part of what's at work here, of course. This story is a type of text we find throughout the gospels and in all sorts of ancient literature in which the wonder working hero is set against crabby and supercilious opponents who are put to shame before an astounded and appreciative audience.

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Each of the gospels is threaded through with stories of sabbath healing that repeatedly portray an ongoing and seemingly willful blindness to the advent and importance of Jesus on the part of those whose religious systems seem secure, whose positions of prestige and power in the society are perpetuated by a legal code that finds them always on the clean side - justified according to the law's letter. Righteous according to the rules.

And Jesus shows them, doesn't he?

These subversive stories give hope and comfort to the powerless and the underdogs. To early Christians persecuted for their faith in Jesus - thrown out of synagogues for heresy, alienated from hellenistic society as atheists and worse, stories in which Jesus silences and shames his critics and stuns potentially hostile crowds into silence or reverence or joy offered strength and encouragement - and throughout history, those at the bottom of the heap: women and slaves and losers and those made marginal because of their diseases or disabilities or origins or orientations - people whose suffering seems always traceable to the hands of the powerful - have lived vicarious victories in the reading and reciting and recounting of these gospel stories.

Is that what we're doing this morning? Enjoying yet another scriptural scene in which the Pharisees are shown up as sticks in the mud? Dialing up a Lukan version of the eternal sitcom the Simpsons, - where everybody's favorite eight-year-old antihero Bart once again exposes blustery self-important Principal Skinner as the the insecure and stuffed-shirt bureaucrat he is? Is that what we're doing? Learning a little bit about how Liberation theology came to be? Spectating our way through Luke, maybe looking for life lessons or ways to feel better or worse about our politics or our piety?

We might use this story about Jesus to flog one another with sabbath-flavored shoulds that echo the oughts of the text, We might wrestle an object lesson about justice and charity and the problems of fussy religiosity and legalism - and all of these themes are in there, they're all available, all have stretched a spine under sermons for a great many centuries now, but I think we are missing something important if we stop here. If we settle on this shore. If we leave these characters and this plot at arms length - as something to see and not a thing to be suffered, we will miss the way the scripture is speaking not only to us but also through us to one another, how it is revealing our own infirmities and indignancies, our own brokenness, our own bondage.

Where are you ailing? Like this woman who appears in the synagogue, where are you bent over or burdened up? Are you tired or sick? Suffering beneath chronic illness or a recovery that seems endless? Or maybe your bondage is spiritual, you're trapped in a loop replaying and remembering the terrible things that have happened to you, the ways and means by which you've been hurt, the hurt you've done to others.

*Woman, you are set free from your ailment.*

There is gospel here for you. Unbidden and unasked for and impossible grace. Jesus calls the woman to stand, and she rises into a new life that is utterly whole - free from the affliction of decades. She is unbound. She rises. The same grace is here for you. The same absolution. New creation.

You are set free. Jesus speaks declaratively. Proclaims a change in reality that is heard to hear. Impossible to believe apart from faith. But it is real, and it's for you.

And if we ask the question about hurt and heartbreak, if the story in this morning's gospel reaches out into our own bondage, into our own bent over brokenness with God's grace, we will also have to open our ears to God's judgement, because that's here, too. We must also bear the sound of our savior pointing out the places where we are stuck in self-assured righteousness, where our weakness masquerades as strength, where we are blind to our own blindnesses - where Jesus' sharp elbows, his sabbath-crashing unpredictability, his refusal to be contained in manageable doses, his indifference to our boundaries, our pieties, our political convictions upsets us or makes us indignant.

It is shocking that Jesus stands in a religiously important place on a religiously important day talking to religiously observant people who are practicing their religion correctly and calls them hypocrites. More shocking and more unsettling still when we admit that his ancient words find purchase here in our house, too, where keeping the sabbath and offering our food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted are activities we indulge as time allows and if funds are available. Where the pointing of the finger and the speaking of evil seem so often practiced as a kind of art form.

*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?*

We bear both Gospel and Law, the burden of judgement and the blessing of grace, not because it builds character, but because that's how it is. Because we are in the midst of Jesus Christ's engagement with the power of evil. This story; Jesus words reveal to us an ongoing struggle in which we are, by virtue of the breath in our lungs, inescapably involved. We don't get to stand on the sidelines, because there are no sidelines. We are the field on which this battle is being pounded out day after day and even right now.

Your life and its loneliness. Its Parkinsons. Its breast cancer. Its broken bones. Its difficult decisions. Your marriage. Your divorce. It's grief. Its comforts. Its cares. Its smugness and cynicism. Your life and its fears and its hopes and its habits and patterns. The bills the kids your health. Your property. Your job or the gaping hole in your days where your job once was. Your treasured friendships. Your withered relationships. Your dwindling retirement account. Your dreams. Your values. Your convictions. Your plans. Your goals. Your gifts. Your bent back.

This is the ground where God in Christ Jesus meets you. The place where Jesus is standing, calling you to rise up whole and rejoice. And it's also where crippling spirits are squatting and shouting at him to get the hell out and shut the hell up and stay where he belongs. And where they are constantly and quietly counseling us to ignore this upstart, to not believe the testimony of the empty cross and the open tomb, to put no faith in the unlikely promises of such an old-fashioned savior.

*Come another day and be healed.*

Salvation and liberation and healing are all bound up in the same language of Luke's active verbs. Jesus is on the offensive in this Gospel - remember what he said at the beginning: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed* - that's how his ministry began, and it was on the sabbath, and that's how it continues.

He is cutting bonds, freeing prisoners who have been taken and tied, and are in the

pitiless power of an enemy whose inhuman work requires no rest.

Death doesn't take a day off; evil cannot comprehend a calendar.

And this is why, I think, there are all these sabbath healings in the Gospels. Jesus is restoring people like the woman with the bent back and the man who was born blind to the gift of rest - the freedoms from work and oppression and compulsion commanded and ordained by God for all the people - and even the animals and the land. He is practicing and proclaiming and delivering the acceptable year of the Lord: God's time.

*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?*

If there is territory to be claimed in Jesus great struggle with the prince of the world and the powers of death, it is time and rest - the outrageous universal idleness of the sabbath day - instituted and ordained by a God with *chutzpa* enough to relax, a day when we are untied and led to water. When we are unmuzzled. When we are invited to breathe, to lay aside for a little while the ten thousand things which snap their digits and make us jump and to live as God's children. the preacher Barbara Brown Taylor invites us to think of ourselves as God's babies, secure in everlasting arms.

Received this way, sabbath itself is liberated from its bondage - reclaimed not as a duty but a delight. And we get to witness God's grace at work among us and in one another in ways that might make us sing, or weep, or dance, or shout. When we get to taste God's promises on our lips, and hear God's word spoken and sung into our ears.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, we read,  
and Forget not all God's benefits -  
who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases;  
who redeems your life from the grave  
and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy;  
who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like an eagle's.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.