

August 21st, 2022

Year C; Proper 16

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

Psalm 70: 1-6

Luke 13: 10-17

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Now Jesus 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.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

At the Friday night concert, I had a conversation that stayed with me as I drove home later. As the concert ended folks jumped into action, helping to fold and store the chairs and gather up trash. In the midst of the whirl of activity stood a small elderly woman, bent over and leaning on a cane. I had spoken to her friend earlier in the evening and knew she had gone to get the car, and I approached the woman bent over her cane to be sure her friend knew she could drive up to the door of the Pavilion, to pick her up. I introduced myself and after a quick conversation about where her friend

could pull up to the door, the woman introduced herself and then said:

“ I’ve not always been like this.”

Her words struck me as brave, speaking what is true, but so often unspoken: *I’ve not always been like this.*

Life can bend all of us, physically, yes, but life can also bend us emotionally, and spiritually too.

In some ways we are bent by things that show, and others invisible: grief, addiction, depression, life being, as it so often is, complex.

The woman who said those wise and brave words: *I’ve not always been like this*, wanted me to know and see the straight-backed woman who still percolated inside her twisted body, the woman with a sparkle in her eye and a spirit of adventure, the woman with a rich and full life and still willing to live a full life, as long as no one dismissed her as a woman bent over, an old crippled woman who could no longer sparkle.

The fact that this woman said yes when her friend invited her to our concert, and got dressed up, in yes, a cheerful outfit with yes, actual sparkles on her hat, told me more about her. But I did not see the sparkles until I met her close up and had our conversation.

I must admit when I saw her earlier in the evening I felt sad for her, for her visible limitations, and painful posture. But when I approached her, the first words she spoke wiped away my focus on sympathy and made me curious to know her: *“ I’ve not always been like this.”*

Only after I got home and told Tim of this woman and how our conversation stayed with me, did I realize how she echoed through our gospel today. Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, the day of rest for devout Jews, when he sees a woman crippled and bent over. The text tells us this condition has been going on for eighteen years. We would do well not to skip over this detail but rather to take a moment to consider eighteen years, and how long that is, how long this woman has suffered. For us that would be since 2004. Eighteen long years.

Eighteen years the woman has struggled to see what others see without effort, without thought, but do not notice: the sky, the clouds, the moon, the stars, the eyes of a loved one.

The woman is seemingly a passerby in the synagogue; she has not approached Jesus or asked for healing. Jesus calls her over and heals her,

without even asking if she wants to be healed. Her response is immediate, and I imagine, shocking to onlookers. Where her back was seemingly permanently twisted and crippled, she can suddenly stand up right, the stars, the clouds suddenly available and easy to behold. And she goes onward in her journey, shouting alleluias to God!

We are called as Christians to follow Jesus and to offer the hope and healing he offers, to listen too when someone says or shows you:

“I’ve not always been like this.”

To notice how folks are bent over by life, by burdens physical, emotional and spiritual, and to offer welcome and hope here at Trinity/SMWC. Can we be a place of welcome and hope? Can each of us, can our church be a vessel of God’s love?

Maybe you offer a hesitant yes in your mind, maybe you offer a confident yes, maybe you have questions and doubts and worries.

Our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah offers a crucial reminder, that our call is not ours alone, our call as individuals, and as our church, is always with God, *“I will with God’s help”*, as we reply so often in our baptismal covenant.

At the time of this reading, Jeremiah is a young boy. When God calls him, Jeremiah quickly notes his deficits: he is too young and he does not know how to speak, much less to preach and prophecy.

“I am only a boy.”

We too are good at noting our deficits, our onlys. We can fill in the blank as we wrestle with call: *“But I am only a....”*

But one reflection on this passage from Jeremiah notes:

“God rarely calls us to do what we can do on our own—we do not need a call for that. God calls us to what is impossible on our own, so we learn to depend on him.” (Christian Century, August 2022, Craig S. Keener, page 20)

This crucial element of call is often lost on us in our modern world, so task oriented and so emphasizing our lists of credentials and abilities.

But still today depending on, leaning on God is foundational to call. I have to admit right now, if there were grades given for trusting in God, leaning on God, I’d get a C- at best.

My first thought is almost always, *“I have to do this myself.”*

I have always been a can-do person, work at a task enough and I can get it

done. My energy, my effort, my willingness to keep at it. All worthy qualities, but lost, incomplete, easily adrift and easily worn out, without God, without leaning on, and knowing, as the writer Annie Lamott says:

“How utterly lost I am without God.”

Our church, we are called to be vessels of welcome and healing, to hear folks when they say or show us, *“I have not always been like this”*, who yearn to share how life has bent them in body, mind or spirit, and to know the healing of community and belonging. I’m hoping if I work hard enough, I can raise my grade to a C or maybe even a C+, if I just work hard enough.

Hmmm.....

Or maybe I can finally learn not to try harder but to lean more, to listen more, to trust more in our God who calls us to impossible work, and then walks every step with us, if we can just look up, and see.

Amen.