

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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August 21, 2022  
Luke 13:10-17

Jesus is the guest preacher in a synagogue on the sabbath. He has been invited to teach that day. And well, you know how it is with pulpit supply, you never quite know what you're going to get—whether you will connect or wish you had stayed home and gardened. Well, on this Sabbath things get dramatic, a fountain of scuttlebutt that is best to be there for yourself.

Jesus is leading, participating, paying attention so to know how they do things, moving with things the way you do as a guest preacher, while also trying to speak a message to these who you do not know so well. But as the outsider to this group, he sees something that they do not seem to notice or pay attention to. He sees someone, and that person catches his attention and triggers his compassion. It is a woman that, we are told, has been crippled for eighteen years. She has been bent over. Now I doubt that Jesus knows that detail immediately. But Jesus sees something in her, he feels something. She is in the back or off to the side. Jesus sees her and responds, calling her over. What does he see in her? What does he feel? What is it that he reacts to? Does he relate to her contorted body? Does he react to her being ignored and looked over? What do you think it is? Everyone is looking at him, but he wants them to notice her.

We stop seeing people sometimes. I mean we pass the same people or types of people all the time and do not stop. We are in the same space with others but it does not change how we go about things. Maybe we extend small courtesies and gestures, the type our poem describes. Courtesies and small kindnesses while we move past one another, while the larger reality is, as Lameris says, “we have so little of each other now, so far from tribe or fire.” That is how it was in the Synagogue, perhaps she had always been there, or maybe she came to hear the guest preacher. Either way, she seems left to herself. Oh, maybe someone helped her in, a small kindness. But no one really took notice, or at least they allowed her to stay in the back or off to the side. They let her be in the periphery.

I suppose that we wouldn't normally see this as an infraction. We are individuals coming and going, letting others do the same with little interference. And in reality, it is no small thing that someone with a bodily deformity was included in the worship environment at all. This is notable; in fact, they probably saw themselves as a welcoming synagogue. Surely, if she was at the temple, she would not be permitted to enter. But they allow her, even helped her in perhaps. So while they leave her in the periphery, is this really that big of a deal. As people who tend to put a high value on minding our own business for the most part, we may not see this as a big deal. But Jesus makes it a big deal.

Perhaps the reason Jesus makes it a big deal is that there in the synagogue on the Sabbath they read and interpret and apply God's law. And yet no one seems to see how God's power might apply this person, or how God's commands might change how they relate to this person. In such a space as that, in such a space as this, we talk about how God's love and redemption shapes us and how we act in the world. And yet, maybe we miss the connections also, being that we tend to value minding our own business and keeping to ourselves.

Now the moment that really excites the gossips in the room is when Jesus breaks from the normal behavior of the pulpit supply and calls this woman to the center and addresses her condition. Here Jesus commits two faux-pas, or insults. First, he is breaking sabbath laws by healing on the Sabbath, which the synagogue leader reacts to explicitly, and two, Jesus is shaming them, making them look bad, which may be the real reason why the synagogue leader reacts so. In an honor-shame culture, this is extremely rude. Jesus is calling them out, exposing their blind-spots.

Jesus sees their blind-spot... literally. While they are looking at and listening to Jesus, there is a woman behind them who is crippled, has been for a great many years. They come to listen and debate God's law, but they do not see her in any significant way, nor act on her behalf. And while the synagogue leader will declare there to be 6 days a week for healing, no one has sought to use those six days on her behalf for eighteen long years.

Blind-spots. We all have them. After all, Jesus does reduce the law to loving God with our whole selves, which is really hard to do. And he boils the law down to loving our neighbor as we do ourselves, which is really hard to do. And with the parable of the good Samaritan, he extends the notion of neighbor to not just our inner circle of friends and family, but anybody. It is a call on an impossible scale.

How do you go about addressing such a challenge—to love in such encompassing and penetrating ways? How do you go about such a responsibility that is overwhelming and likely impossible to fulfill perfectly? What guides you? Inevitably certain people are going to catch our eye, and others fall into the periphery, into our blind-spots. We can't help it. It is too much.

So what guides you? I ask this, for there is another aspect to this story that catches my attention. Not only is there a suffering person in their midst who they have passed over continually, but more-so, when Jesus acts on her behalf, a rift seems to form, or come to the surface—a rift in two groups that are guided differently. A divide between those guided by passion and intuition, and those that adhere to rules and policy. Jesus sees a woman bent over, and he responds giving little to no consideration to the fact that it is a sabbath and that healing might be prohibited by the particulars of sabbath laws. He sees, he feels, he acts.

The synagogue leader and the others, on the other hand, react not to the woman but to the infraction. They are ok with her being bent over. They are attentive, however, to the fact that Jesus heals on the sabbath. There is plenty of time for healing, why break the sabbath laws? You may object to a law, but you do not just break it. You discuss and debate it, learn to work around it, to see if you can change it, but you don't just break it. Procedure and protocol is one way, after all, that we mitigate the overwhelming-ness of loving, you lean on the structures, on the policies, on order. You need them, otherwise chaos ensues. Because this call to love is too big.

So, which do you relate to more? Who do you relate to? The one guided by passion and intuition, the one who feels something and acts? Or the one guided by law, procedure, protocol, who attends to proper order and who follows due process? Do you feel that these things need time to be sorted out, and you have to follow the procedures or go through the proper channels to change them? Which approach do you relate to more?

Now this might feel like a trick question, or at least an unfairly weighted question. For who wants to choose the option that opposes Jesus? Who wants to be the rule-follower that Jesus rebukes? There is probably a tendency to want the right Sunday school answer, and so we assume there is a right answer, and the right answer is “Jesus.” In our family, my kids regularly ask me rhetorical questions like, “dad, guess what.” Obviously, I have no idea what, and being asked these questions so many times, I now regularly respond, “Jesus?” Because, Jesus is always the right answer. Anyhow, I digress...

Apart from such weighted aspects, how would you answer—which do you relate to more? the passionate and intuitive, or the procedure and proper-order oriented folks?

I push the question, because I think it is more complicated than a straightforward answer. It is more complicated the more we contemplate it. Because even if we are the staunchest rule follower, there comes a moment, perhaps for a child, or a family member, or a friend, or someone you sympathize with, when you become inconsistent. There is a moment when you break from the rules and become guided by passion and compassion, and intuition. You may have the harshest opinions about certain things, until it is your kid. You start empathizing and acting on their behalf and start getting lax and inconsistent on policy. You start hoping the judge is lenient and they get off easy.

And for you who operate by passion and intuition, scoffing at policy and procedure, there inevitably comes the person every so often that triggers in you the rules, the standards, right and wrong, justice and pay-back, and you want to hold them to the strictest of standards. They need to get what they deserve. They need to be checked by order, and rules, and policy and procedure. We judge them harshly rather than compassionately. We might say things like, “well if they didn’t break the law they wouldn’t have a problem, would they?”

So, if I’m correct here in that we are all a bit inconsistent in who garnishes our compassion and flexibility, then the real question is this: who moves you and why? Whose cause moves you, and Whose plight causes you to bend the rules? Whose dilemmas get you out of your seat and transforms you from a passive observer into a passionate advocate? And who does not?

The synagogue leader in our passage is not a monster, I doubt. He had compassion, even passion, I suspect. But he is obtuse to this woman. He does not feel her pain, does not see the world through her eyes, does not know what cripples her, or what it is like to move through the world so contorted. And not only does he not see her in any meaningful way, or act on her behalf, but, he does not like being called out. And, he perpetuates a system that continues to not see her.

Perhaps another question that deserves asking is what does your system serve? Who does it serve? Because rules and order and procedures are not benign. And they have a way of telling us who to be compassionate for and who not to be.

The call to love our neighbors as ourselves, and furthermore as Jesus will extend it further, to love our neighbors as Christ loved us, it is an overwhelming call, a call on an impossible scale. It is not hard to point fingers at others. No one is going to get a perfect score on this task. But, I do think it worth asking ourselves, who have we stopped seeing? Who have we lost compassion for? Who have we left relegated to the periphery? Where has our faith been limited, meaning we don’t really believe that what we talk about here can actually change somebody’s life.

And maybe if we can avoid that prideful reaction to having our blind-spots called out, if we can avoid the rather easy fall-back of pointing out others' faults. If we can avoid the tendency to feel guilty for how we may have fallen short, or if we can avoid the impulse to give up because the call is too big, maybe we can just start trying to see the world anew through the eyes of Jesus, and then in those moments when we see someone anew, take the next right step.

And all God's people said... Amen.

### *Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman*

<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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? <sup>16</sup> 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?” <sup>17</sup> 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.