

## **A Love Story About Healing and Redemption**

Luke 13:10-17

You gotta love this guy! The story of Jesus' healing a woman bent over with terrible arthritis and thus breaking the law against doing work on the Sabbath, reminds me why Jesus captured my heart. Here we see Jesus as the living expression, the embodiment of God's love for all people.

Jesus sees a woman bent over and crippled. He recognizes her pain. He identifies with her suffering. He understands immediately what she is going through. And in that love he invites her over to him, telling her, "*Woman, you are set free from your ailment.*" And then he touches her and she is healed.

Imagine for a moment, yourself as a person bent and crippled. Every step is painful. You can't look others in the eye. Only when you're lying down are you able to look up. You're a picture of abject suffering. Your very life is a burden to yourself and others. Can you imagine the joy if Jesus told you out of the blue that he set you free? Can you imagine having your burden actually lifted, standing straight for the first time in decades, and lifting your hands in thanks and praise?

There is another Gospel story very much like this one that Luke includes just a few paragraphs later in 14:1-6. This time Jesus is having supper at the home of a Pharisee along with other lawyers and Pharisees on a Sabbath afternoon. He notices a man with *dropsy*, an old fashioned term for swelling in the legs, arms, hands and joints. Among other things it is a symptom of congestive heart failure. Jesus asks the lawyers and Pharisees at dinner with him if it is legal to heal people on the Sabbath. They all knew the answer; it was not legal to heal on the Sabbath. Most of them had been present at or heard about Jesus' having healed a crippled woman at the Sabbath service and they recognized how unpopular a position that was, so they all kept silent. So, Jesus invited the man with the swelling over, touched him and healed him.

Is it any wonder early Christians could speak of Jesus, describing him as "*the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of the cross?*" (Colossians 1:15, 19-20) For Jesus, as we see him here in these Gospel stories, is the living expression of God's great love. He shows us what God's love looks like. He seeks out the broken, the hurting, the lost, the sick and the needy. As he proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry in his home-town synagogue in Nazareth, "*the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to 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 favor.*" (Luke 4:18-19)

What about God's mission is revealed in these two Gospel stories? God's love is revealed, especially for the one who is ostracized, who is sick and broken and in pain. As Jesus reaches out to them, God is reaching out through Jesus to all who are broken or

suffering or in need. And frankly do you know anyone who in some vital way is not hurting and lonely and broken and in need? Through Jesus God is reaching out to all of us. Another key truth about God's love revealed in these Gospel stories is that God wants to heal us. God's love seeks us out to heal us. It is God's will, God's desire, that we be set free from all illness. God wants to heal our physical infirmities. God wants to set us free also from all the spiritual ailments that oppress us. God wants to free us from our sins, our resentments, our harboring of anger, our bad habits, our negative attitudes and our guilt. That was Jesus' mission then. And it still is his mission today. Bring your broken bodies, your broken hearts and your wounded souls. Entrust yourself to Jesus' love. He wants to heal you. He has power to heal. His very mission is to set us free from all that oppresses us.

I think these Gospel stories also reveal that God longs to heal our broken institutions of literalism and narrow mindedness. The head of the synagogue and the lawyers and Pharisees were correct; it was not legal to heal on the Sabbath, because healing and medicine were a form of work. But they were missing the whole point of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was God's gift of a day of *rest*. People need a day off, a day of rest from all our work. The very purpose of the Sabbath was to heal and sustain God's people. So, for Jesus to restore someone to wholeness on the Sabbath was not so much *work* as it was *fulfillment* of God's very Sabbath purpose.

The image from this gospel passage of a woman standing tall with arms outstretched to heaven was the logo of the Episcopal Women's Caucus in the 1970's as they worked to pass legislation that would allow women as well as men to say *yes* to God's call to serve as a priest. The restriction of priesthood as a male-only profession is to me a good example of the kind of narrow-mindedness that Jesus confronted in the synagogues of his own day.

There is plenty of hypocrisy in the Church today as there was in the Synagogues of Jesus' day. In our blindness we tend to put limits on God's power to heal and transform and welcome all people in his love. Jesus confronts us in our hypocrisy and challenges us to open our church more widely to his grace.

Last of all these two Gospel stories are a reminder of the Kingdom of God. The story continues in Luke 13:18-21 in that same Synagogue where the woman was healed, Jesus told two parables about the Kingdom of God: the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of leaven mixed in the dough. Both parables are about something small, a tiny seed becoming a big tree, or yeast bubbling away in the dough in secret. Jesus' own ministry was like that seed or bit of yeast.

Jesus began his ministry by announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He himself was the visible sign of God's Kingdom breaking through. Many times Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God coming near – through an act of healing, in God's power to overturn evil, in Jesus' own words and ministry, and in the words and ministry of the disciples. When John the Baptist was in prison he sent several of his disciples with a question for Jesus. Was he the long-awaited Messiah or were they to wait for the one

who was still to come. Jesus answered them to go back and tell John about what they had witnessed: *“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers’ are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”* (Luke 7:22-23)

Today in these two Gospel stories we see the Kingdom of God come near. The Kingdom of God is breaking through old expectations, breaking through human limitations and God in Jesus is revealed as the God who reaches out to those who are burdened by illness and hurts of all kinds. When we come to Jesus in our brokenness and need, when we reach out to him in our shame and sinfulness, when we believe in his power to heal, when we recognize our need to change and let go of those things that put limits on his love, when we make common cause with those who are oppressed, his Kingdom has come near to us. His Kingdom is even now breaking through.