

“Healing on the Sabbath”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
August 22, 2010
Luke 13:10-17

(Begin in center aisle.)

In the Gospel today, we hear the story of Jesus healing a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. This spirit of weakness caused her to be bent over and completely unable to stand up straight. As I was thinking about this story, I wondered what that would feel like, and so I decided to try it out.

(Bend over and walk around in front of altar rail.)

We can't all do this now, but I invite you to try this out later on today so you can see what the experience is like.

It hurts.

It makes me feel off balance.

I can't look at anyone directly. I have to turn my head to the side to see or lift it up at a painful angle.

I don't know what to do with my arms. Do they swing free? Do I hold them against my body?

When I imagine life like this, I wonder who will have anything to do with me? Who would want to marry me? How could I have children? How can I work?

Not only was she a woman with a crippling illness, but it also seems that a spirit or demon was causing this problem. Jesus says she's been bound by Satan. She's doubly outcast, on the margins, shuffling around the edges of the community.

Imagine what it must have been like, after eighteen long, painful years of being hunched over to have Jesus call her over. She didn't ask him to heal her. Nor did anyone else. No one's faith, not even her own, made her well. Jesus just called her over, laid hands on her and said, "Woman you are free from your ailment." And up she stood. Able to look him and anyone else in the eyes. Able to raise her body and lift her hands to praise God. Imagine what it must have been like. Free at last. Free from pain. Free to return to the community. Free from bondage. Alleluia.

(Back to pulpit.)

This week I read an article about someone who had taken a trip to Ethiopia a few years ago. As he climbed a mountain near the capital city, he saw women and young girls carrying firewood down the mountain. They were barefoot and bent over, with seven-foot wide bundles of eucalyptus strapped onto their backs. They would carry these bundles about ten miles to the city center where they would receive the equivalent of about \$2. I can imagine that they would look very much like the woman in the story and that after long days of being bent over by the weight of the firewood, it might be difficult for them to even stand up straight. These women in Ethiopia carry on their backs not only the burden of the eucalyptus trees, but also the weight of the systems and structures that bind them to such back-breaking labor and prevent them from being free.

So is it any wonder that Jesus got angry with the leader of the synagogue who protested that healing was work inappropriate to the Sabbath? Of course he wanted to release a woman who had been captive for 18 years. No, it could not wait another day.

I'm guessing that most of us are familiar with the Ten Commandments, including the one that says, "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." Well, there are two versions of the Ten Commandments. In the version in the book of Exodus, the rationale given for keeping Sabbath is that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, thereby blessing that day as a day of rest. This is the understanding of Sabbath held by the synagogue leader. But there is another understanding of Sabbath in the version of the Ten Commandments found in Deuteronomy. In this book, Moses says, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

It is this second understanding of Sabbath to which Jesus is referring in his argument with the leader of the synagogue. If the Sabbath is a day to remember how God brought the Israelites out of Egypt into freedom, if the Sabbath is a day of release, then what could be more appropriate on the Sabbath than releasing a daughter of Abraham from eighteen years of bondage to an illness? Surely healing this woman and setting her free is exactly the kind of thing that should happen on the Sabbath.

Our Sabbath is Sunday, the day on which we remember that Jesus released us from the bondage of death, the time during which we stand up straight and praise God for all of God's mighty acts, but most especially for freeing us from our captivity to death and promising us eternal life. This is the day in our week when we come together with thankful hearts to worship God for lifting the burdens that bind us and to praise God for our freedom.

Or is it?

Is that what Sunday, our Sabbath, is for us? Do we feel freedom and release here? For some of us this might be the place where we put on a happy face and pretend we have it all together so we won't feel embarrassed by the painful and heavy weight we feel crippling us. For some of us this might be the place where we come to do work that no longer brings us joy but simply weighs us down. For some of us this might be the place where we come to do our duty, to fulfill our obligation, or it might be just one more thing that's on our exhausting to-do list for the weekend. Some of us may spend our time here going over our responsibilities in our minds, too busy to rest and renew. Some may come looking for community but feel that their burdens are too heavy to ask someone to share the weight.

Personally I would like Sundays at Hickory Neck to be a time and place where everyone who comes can experience Sabbath as a release from the burdens of the week, as a place to let go of whatever is weighing them down, as a time for grateful praise and freedom from worry. I would hope that Sundays here remind us that we have been freed from death, redeemed from sin, and that God continues to do mighty works in our lives.

So I invite you to take a moment to think about some questions:

What burdens are weighing you down? (Pause)

What is binding you? (Pause)

Where do you need healing? (Pause)

We might not be literally bent over from the effects of a disease, and we may not be carrying loads of firewood on our backs, but we are all in need of Jesus' healing touch. I invite you on this Sunday, this Sabbath, to bring your burdens forward and lay them on the altar, to let Jesus release you from them so that you may stand up straight and sing God's praises.