



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, AUGUST 25, 2019
ISAIAH 58:9B-14; PSALM 103: 1-8; HEBREWS 12:18-29; LUKE 13:10-17

A TRIP TO PROVIDENCE

Luke 13:10-17 [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.]

This summer, my husband and I traveled to Providence, Rhode Island to the Association of Episcopal Deacons Triennial Conference. So picture a room of 300 deacons. We met deacons from across North America and one from Cuba, whose introduction brought the house down! Our presiding Bishop Michael Curry was a keynote speaker who also brought the house down in that room

full of enthusiasm for the Jesus Movement.

On the second day, we walked as a group with Bishop Curry to the nearby Cathedral of St. John, founded in 1722. It houses the Center for Reconciliation and an exhibit on Rhode Island's historic economic dependence upon the slave trade. As I walked through the exhibit, I came across a chart illustrating the

staggering amount that Rhode Island had invested in the slave trade in the 18th century. Lines showing the movement of money flowing back and forth between Rhode Island and the South formed a massive net cast upon the nation's map from border to border.

Churches were built on it too. In 1722 the livelihoods of many parishioners in Providence were dependent upon the economic engine of the slave trade, from ship building to manufacturing the clothing of slaves. Already by then our nation had worked itself into being stuck in the belly of a whale and remained there for a long time. Even to the morally outraged, it must've felt hopeless at times to envision an alternative.

In the gospel today, we encounter two people stuck in their circumstances but who are invited to share in a new vision. The first is a woman who had been painfully bent over for a long time and could not stand up through her own power. But then one day, she went to the synagogue and Jesus called her forward. What went through her mind as she took that first step in front of the crowd? It

likely took a dose of humility. Did she hesitate in fear? Or was she done with fear? Maybe she had a quiet prayer: that through her, God would demonstrate God's vision for God's people.

We don't know what she was feeling in that first step, but we do know that she stepped forward, and was delivered from the bondage of the spirit that bent her. She had moved from looking down at the ground to looking forward straight into the face of Jesus. I can only imagine the unbelievable relief of standing up proudly, joyfully, for the first time in 18 years!

In her praises that followed, I think she was expressing gratitude for something beyond just standing up straight: a release from bondage more lasting and precious than overcoming her present circumstance. She received attention that challenged the power structure and stood up into an eternal vision of freedom bigger than herself.

In her story, we get a hint of Jesus' own journey to come: a descending and rising. I get the feeling he relates to her. He knows she's been in a dim pit and doesn't just throw her a rope. Instead, he's right

there next to her saying “I know every access point out of here. Let me help you up now, regardless of rules, so that you experience the fullness of life.”

The leader of the synagogue enters then, indignant by Jesus’ threatening the sanctity of the sabbath. I don’t blame the leader for being touchy. His people had survived war atrocities and forced deportations. They had relied on the law and written prophecy to provide meaning and hope out of moral chaos. My guess is he truly loved the law and sacred tradition, out of genuine desire to honor his people and glorify God. He seemed to forget though; the prophets didn’t put God into static categories. God was a lot of things: lawmaker and judge, but also creative healer who crosses divides. It’s possible that underneath the synagogue leader’s bluster, he saw Truth standing in front of him and remembered. Maybe his quiet prayer was “Release *us* from what binds us. Show *us* the access points out. We want to stand at full stature too.”

A commentary I read on this gospel passage described it as “the entirety of Jesus’ mission in one reading.” When we

look carefully, it reads like a step-by-step instruction manual to new life: come out of the crowd and be released from what binds you. Praise God. Then step outside the world’s lines – self-imposed, inherited, or otherwise, and help others find space and grace to be unbound.

This summer in our gospel readings, we’ve heard many stories that help illustrate this vision Jesus has for us. We heard the story of Mary and Martha hosting and being hosted by Jesus. We heard cautions of storing up treasures on earth, and about not making earthly dwellings but rather looking up to Jesus’ transfiguration and dazzling brightness. And now a light is being cast upon what keeps us bound from doing these things, and the access points out. This is important today because the woman, the synagogue leader and the parishioners of 1722 Providence, Rhode Island for that matter, are far from alone in their stuckness.

This summer, our nation has been working itself into the belly of another whale. Families across our country are being separated and in one single day in

Mississippi 650 were arrested. In July, Jose Robles, who had been living in sanctuary at Gethsemane Lutheran in Seattle for one year, took the step to meet with Immigration and Customs Enforcement. His family said they were ready to take the step because, “They’ve taken so much from us, they’ve taken away our fear.” A group which included many from Saint Mark’s walked a mile with Jose to the Department of Homeland Security office.

We stood together and linked arms, seeing Truth right in front of us as he walked in. This situation is one where we

cannot pull ourselves out on our own power but need the instruction manual of the gospel today: step forward, rise up, praise God, allow grace.

We hear in Isaiah today: the LORD will make our bones strong; and when we honor the sabbath we’re made to ride upon the heights of the earth. That sounds like freedom. On this Sabbath may God grant us release from the stuck places of our lives. May we stand up fully into God’s vision of freedom: step forward, rise up, praise God, allow grace.



SAINT MARK'S
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