

## Crippled Spirits

August 22, 2010 Firelands Presbyterian Church

Jeremiah 1:4-10 Psalm 71:1-6 Hebrews 12:18-29 Luke 13:10-17

It's easy to read this story from Luke as another one of the "gotcha" stories against the scribes and the Pharisees. But these people, represented by the leader of the synagogue here, are really just trying to do their best. Let's look at this from their point of view.

We know that keeping the Sabbath is one of the 10 Commandments. Number 4: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:8-10a). And further reading in the Old Testament shows us that the Sabbath is to be a day of rest, a day of "holy convocation"—we'd call that worship—and a day that is to be kept in every family and dwelling. The Sabbath was a sign between God and God's people, so to break the Sabbath was to break the covenant with God. And the penalty for breaking the Sabbath is explained in Exodus 31:14—"You shall keep the sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people."

This was important! No wonder the scribes and the Pharisees were so vigilant about Sabbath-keeping! To break the Sabbath was to break the covenant with God—whew! It's their job, it's their duty, it's their God-given responsibility as religious leaders to make sure that everyone in their sphere of influence keeps the Sabbath.

And then here comes Jesus, and he very obviously does work—healing the bent-over woman's non-life threatening condition—on the Sabbath, right in front of them. He breaks the Sabbath. Which means, in their eyes, in the eyes of all of the holy scriptures and the rich tradition of their religion that man, this "Jesus" is breaking the covenant with God. He deserves at the very least to be "cut off from among the people" if not put to death.

He could have done this on any one of the other days, and it would have been great. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day" the synagogue leader says. He's not chiding only Jesus; he's also going after the woman, who should have known better than to come to be cured on the sabbath.

But, as far as we know, the woman did not come that day expecting to be healed. We don't even know whether she knew that Jesus would be teaching in the synagogue that day. It's very likely that she came because the sabbath was to be a day of convocation for every household. It's also likely that she was alone, as people of that time thought that such debilitating conditions were signs of an indwelling evil spirit.

Luke says that she just "appeared," this woman who had been crippled for 18 years. For 18 years she had navigated the world looking only at a small square of ground at her feet. But when Jesus saw her, "he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' [And] when he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."

Maybe the leader of the synagogue wasn't just chiding the bent-over woman, though, but was also warning anyone else out there who needed healing in some way that they should come back some other day. Not that he didn't want them to be healed, you understand, but that the timing was wrong. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

He was not a mean man or a hateful man. He was a man trying his best to show his love for God. And that meant that work was not to be done on the Sabbath, for if the sabbath were broken, it would be as if the people were saying, "We don't care about you, God. Your covenant with us means nothing!"

And then Jesus said to him and the other leaders, "You hypocrites! ... 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?" The sabbath day—a day to be set free from bondage, as we are reminded in the description of this commandment in Deuteronomy: "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. ... 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" (Deut 5:12, 15).

For the leader of the synagogue had become so bound up in following the ins and outs of the sabbath laws that he had forgotten their purpose and their meaning. As Jesus said elsewhere, "The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath," and "The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath" (Mark 2:27-28). And when Jesus is Lord, the decision is always on the side of freedom from bondage, of healing, of love.

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One of the ways we're taught to read scripture is to imagine ourselves in the stories. And folks, as Christians, as people who attend church with some regularity, who read the scriptures and profess our faith in God, we are the leader of the synagogue. We know what God asks of us, and we do our best to do it. We teach God's covenant laws in our families, so that our children and grandchildren will also know and be able to follow God's laws.

We are also the bent-over woman, crippled with pains and fears—with arthritis ... depression, loneliness ... heart disease, diabetes ... shame. Crippled so that we see only a small patch of ground at our feet, hemmed in by self-doubt and anxiety and pain. For years we have been crippled, in one way or another, and we go about our lives as best as we can, wishing we could be healed and stand tall, but not really believing it will ever happen.

And so when Jesus says, "[My child], you are set free from your ailment," he is speaking to us. Hallelujah!

And when Jesus says, "You hypocrites!" he is speaking to us as well.

And that makes us cringe, because aren't we doing our best to follow God's laws? Aren't we doing our best to follow what Jesus taught us and do what Jesus would do?

But, oh, it's not always easy to do what Jesus would do. Remember last week's sermon text, in which Jesus said that he had come to bring fire to the earth, not to bring peace but division? Doing what Jesus would do is bound to raise hackles—or at least eyebrows. Doing what Jesus would do may break ordinances or laws, and it may at times seem to disobey what parts of scripture would tell us.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, it was a given in most U.S. churches that slavery was scriptural. If the scriptures didn't recommend slavery, they at least accepted that it was just part of the way the world worked. But then a number of Christians—theologians and lay people—began to speak up and say, *No. No, slavery contravenes Jesus' commandment to love our neighbors. Slavery is not on the side of healing and freedom from bondage and love.* This was not a popular opinion in a lot of churches, both Southern and Northern. And a lot of folks said, *Well, no, slavery's probably not all that good, but imagine what would happen to the economy if we got rid of it! Let's wait for a better time.*

Like the leader of the synagogue saying, *This just isn't the right time. Come back for healing, for freedom from bondage, for love, on another day.*

In an impoverished neighborhood in Philadelphia, this summer, Hope United Church of Christ was told by the city that zoning laws did not allow sleeping within the walls of the church, and that they would

need to close down their overnight homeless shelter. I'm sure a lot of folks in the area, in other churches in the city and beyond, thought *Oh, isn't that too bad. They'll have to wait for another time, maybe after they've gotten the building fixed up more.* But the people in that church said, *Hmmm.* And they started holding all-night prayer vigils. A lot of the pray-ers are the same men who used to come to the homeless shelter, and apparently sometimes they fall asleep while praying. (I've done that, haven't you?)

The church wasn't willing to say, *Oh, this must not be the right time. They'll have to come for healing, for freedom from bondage, for love, some other time.* The church said, "We must do what Jesus would do."

We are pulled, we Christians, in different directions, even by scripture. For we know that, if you look hard enough, you can always find a scripture that will contradict another one. Are women to cover their heads and keep quiet in church, or are women called to be church leaders and ministers? Did Jesus come only for Jews or for all people?

And sometimes we are pulled in different directions between what scripture seems to say and what our modern world says is right. Is divorce never allowed, or is it sometimes a sad solution to a failed marriage? Should we punish our children by beating them—spare the rod and spoil the child—or does corporal punishment teach them that whoever can hit hardest, wins?

And the key to the answers we struggle for is to remember that Jesus healed on the sabbath. Jesus chose healing and release from bondage and love.

Prayer: Heal our crippled spirits so that we might stand upright. Allow us to see more than the small square of ground beneath our feet, whether that ground is filled with rigidity or fatigue or fear. And help us always to decide on the side of healing and release from bondage and love.