

Sermon for Proper 16C
Sunday, August 21, 2022
“Caught between the rules and grace”

Text: Luke 13:10-17; Isaiah 58:13-14; Psalm 103

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sometimes in life we find ourselves facing a conflict between the rules and expectations of society, or an institution, and the expedience to show a moment of grace. The story that forms our Gospel lesson this morning is an interesting juxtaposition of the rules by which the world is bound and the freedom that is to be discovered in God. In this short vignette, we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when suddenly a woman comes to Jesus for healing. Without hesitation, Jesus heals her, but then, he is quickly scolded by the religious authority of the synagogue, because he has healed on the Sabbath.

The fact that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue is a testament to his Jewish heritage, but the religious leaders were constantly testing Jesus’ Jewishness. Luke spends a great deal of time trying to legitimize Jesus’s authority as a Jew in order to strengthen the case that Jesus is indeed the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets: Jesus’s genealogy appears at the beginning of Luke’s gospel, Jesus frequently quotes the Hebrew scriptures, and in today’s gospel passage, Jesus is teaching in the principal place of learning for Jews. Luke sets up this little scene by letting his readers know that Jesus is fully and fervently a Jew; if anyone should know the Law, it’s Jesus. Then Luke presents the conflict. Jesus heals a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. We know very little about the woman. She is not introduced to us by name, and all we know about her ailment is that she was unable to straighten herself. Her swift and complete healing causes quite a fuss in the eyes of the leader of the synagogue, who does not hesitate to scold Jesus for breaking one of the core teachings of the Law by engaging in what he considered work on the Sabbath. Now, the focus of the story is not the miracle or even the healing itself. It simply occurs. What becomes the focus is the conflict that results. The leader of the synagogue is shocked that a teacher of the Law would break a cardinal commandment of remembering the Sabbath day and keeping it holy. Not only that, the words of the prophet Isaiah that was in today’s Old Testament lesson might have echoed in his mind as a devout Jew:

“If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

An act of violating one of God’s commandments could jeopardize the prosperity of Israel—they were already living under occupation by the Roman Empire. So the leader says, “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 focusing on the rules; he was concerned about the way things “ought” not be done. He tried to focus everyone’s attention on the rules, but Jesus turns the situation around by deferring to a greater authority—God—who is always to be glorified. Jesus took the opportunity to show extreme grace, which was pronounced upon the woman. The power in this story is in its simplicity: Jesus healed the woman simply by laying hands on her, “and immediately she was straightened up.” That’s how the original text put it; in other words, there was an outside agent responsible for her healing. That agent was, of course, God. Facing the conflict with the leader of the synagogue who took issue with Jesus’s healing on the Sabbath was the pronouncement that God must be glorified by the healing of this woman, and it must be done on God’s holy day. The Sabbath was commanded by God for the benefit of humanity, not only for rest and renewal, but also, so that we can remove worldly distractions and enjoy a clearer, unimpeded experience of God. The leader of the synagogue considered healing work that was forbidden on the Sabbath; Jesus reinforced that healing is the work of God, supremely appropriate to occur whenever he wills, even on the Sabbath.

In our own time and in our own lives we often find ourselves facing conflicts between the rules and expectations of society and the need to show grace. Our government leaders might enacting laws that rub us the wrong way. We encounter legislation that severely jeopardizes people’s human rights, that violates their dignity. Even the Church struggles with its own ancient traditions when it debates having women or anyone else who doesn’t identify as a straight man to serve as leaders at all levels. We are constantly struggling in a conflict between the rules that human society and its institutions impose and the need to show the grace and mercy that God expects.

The teaching point of today’s Gospel lesson is that when we find ourselves sandwiched between the rules and God’s grace, God continues to break into our reality, challenging our complacency over what we think about the way things have always been and the way things ought to be. Just like Jesus knocked the leader of the synagogue out of his comfort zone by healing on the Sabbath, God knocks us out of our comfort zone by inviting us to explore, consider, and accept new realities. We should have the courage to challenge our own fears, our own presumptions, and be proclaimers of God’s grace. We can change our attitudes to make certain that we respect each other as children of God. We can act in ways that reject injustice, inequality, racism, sexism, classism. We ought to rejoice that God loves us so much that he does not let us remain in the same place. He moves us, he moves our hearts, and he surprises us, even when our own actions or the actions of human institutions seem to slow down God’s plan. However, in the end, we know that God is ultimately in charge of every situation. Whatever our affliction may be—whether physical, mental, or the brokenness of our lives or the human institutions that we deal with in our lives—God is merciful, faithful, and just. God heals us of all our infirmities.

The scriptural text doesn't tell us what happened to the woman in the gospel story after she was healed. Perhaps in her excitement over being healed of an eighteen-year-old affliction, the woman the Gospel story went away exclaiming the words of the psalm from today. As we ourselves marvel at how God surprises us and heals us in unexpected ways, we too should go our way praising God with the words of Psalm 103:

Bless the LORD, O my soul, *
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul, *
and forget not all his benefits.
He forgives all your sins *
and heals all your infirmities;
The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.
Bless the LORD. Alleluia! Amen.

Resources

“Commentary on Luke 13:10-17,” http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2956

“Daughters of Abraham,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4699>