

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Don't Let the Law Get in the Way"
Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Luke 13:10-17
August 23-24, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Did you notice that the little lady in today's Gospel never **directly asks** Jesus to help her? But – she has gotten herself to worship despite her handicap, and as a person of faith she's certainly silently asking **God** for help. Since she's been suffering for 18 long years, she may have given up hope of **healing**, but she still needs grace to **cope**. She's a woman of faith, so she trusts God is going to deliver **what** she needs, **when** she needs it. In the fullness of time God does precisely that, through Jesus.

And not everybody is happy about it. The leader of the synagogue is actually apoplectic because, from his perspective, Jesus has violated the Sabbath by working. In his mind, the Law with a capital L should prevent Jesus from performing a miracle until the sun goes down. After all, anyone who's been crippled for 18 years should be able to wait one more day for relief. In his mind, it's Jesus who should immediately straighten up and fly right!

Jesus loved the heart of the Law and kept the commandment to honor the Sabbath by worshiping God and helping His neighbor. It's not like He was a scofflaw who did His carpentry on the Sabbath to make money. He saw the liberation of God's people from sickness and sin as His holy work that did not violate the commandment in any way. Texas Congressman James Talarico put it this way: "...we... follow a teacher, a rabbi who said, '**Don't let the law get in the way of loving your neighbor.**' Loving your neighbor is the most important law."¹

It's interesting that St. Luke is the only one who tells this story about the healing of the bent-over woman. He's also the only one who writes about the Good Samaritan, the Prodigal Son, the lost sheep, the ten lepers, Zacchaeus the hated, dishonest, vertically challenged tax collector. Luke is also the only one who records the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. Luke is very interested in the same people **Jesus** is very interested in, people that nobody else considers very valuable or very important at all: women, widows, children, the poor, the sick, outcasts, foreigners. In those days there was no ulterior motive for helping people like that: they couldn't give you material gifts as thanks, they couldn't

get you elected, they couldn't give you access to power. But Jesus loved them because God loves them, still: the last, the lost, the least.

St. Luke frames this story as one of bondage and freedom. The leader of the synagogue complains about Jesus healing on the Sabbath and Jesus answers him and the other naysayers (Lk. 13:15-16):

*“‘You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath **untie** his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? ¹⁶ 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?’” (NRSV)*

... Jesus shot back, “You frauds! Each Sabbath every one of you regularly unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So why isn’t it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years?” (The Message)

Jesus frees us from bondage to sin as surely as God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and Jesus brings us Home again as surely as God returned the Jewish people from exile in Babylon. Jesus’ physical healings, like of this bent-over woman, always have the subtext of forgiveness of sins, the most important healing of all: the healing of our souls.

We pray Psalm 103 this weekend, a psalm that praises God for healing the sickness of our bodies **and** our souls, a psalm that has been called “the favored praise of sinners.”² I’ve known the words by heart ever since first hearing the music of “Bless the Lord” in *Godspell* back in the 70’s.

**Oh bless the Lord my soul!
His praise to thee proclaim!
And all that is within me join,
To bless his holy name! ...
His mercies bear in mind!
Forget not all His benefits,
The Lord, to thee, is kind.**

**He will not always chide
He will with patience wait
His wrath is ever slow to rise...
And ready to abate...
Oh bless the lord my soul! He pardons all thy sins
Prolongs thy feeble breath
He healeth thine infirmities
And ransoms thee from death**

He clothes thee with his love
 Upholds thee with his truth
 And like an eagle he renews
 The vigor of thy youth Then bless His holy name
 Whose grace hath made thee whole
 Whose love and kindness crowns
 Thy days
 Oh bless the lord
 Bless the lord my soul...!

The Lord's qualities of loving kindness, mercy, compassion, are at the forefront. Yet the Lord who heals us of our sickness and of our sin, who frees us from bondage to all that imprisons us, who *"redeems [our] life from the grave and crowns [us] with steadfast love and mercy"* (Ps. 103: 4) is the same Lord who *"provides vindication and justice for **all** who are oppressed."* (Ps. 103:6) Frequently the Lord provides vindication and gives justice **to** human beings **through** human beings. As 6 children are baptized this weekend, their parents will promise to help them grow in the Christian faith, including "working for justice and peace in all the earth," which is the baptismal vocation of **every** Christian, not just community organizers. As we said earlier, St. Luke reminds us that **Jesus** was and is very interested in people not considered very valuable or important then or to some extent now either: women, the widowed, children, the poor, the sick, outcasts, foreigners. We are to love those whom Jesus loves, those in whom Jesus lives: *"Whenever you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family, you did it to me."* (Matthew 25:40) When we see someone bowed under the weight of a great sorrow or sickness, unable to stand up straight for the burden of illness or poverty or isolation they carry, we are act as Jesus would to **un**burden them, as God gives us ability and opportunity. God forbid **we** should be guilty of laying additional heavy burdens on anyone's back, as Jesus accused the Pharisees.

It's a fair question to ask ourselves, with the help of the Holy Spirit, "What spirit or infirmity spiritually cripples **us**?" If we are **not** offering food to the hungry, healthcare to the sick, if we are **not** satisfying the needs of the afflicted, as we read in this weekend's reading from Isaiah (Isaiah 58:9b-14), **that** may be the worst infirmity that cripples us – the sickness of which we need to be healed, the sin of which we need to be forgiven. Thankfully, if we realize this and ask forgiveness, ours is a God of steadfast love and mercy, who will forgive and allow us to be agents of steadfast love and mercy, in this way keeping

God' name holy, participating in the coming of God's kingdom and the doing of God's will, as our baptism requires. Amen.

¹Amanda Tyler, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), p. 161.

²James Luther Mays, *Psalms* (*Interpretation* series, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 326.

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