

August 25, 2013

Scripture Lessons ~ *Isaiah 58:9b-14*

Luke 13:10-17

Sermon *A Crippling Spirit*

I have to tell you about my boys' Great Grandmother, not presently living, but their Great Grandmother on their mother's side was what I would call a sort of soft spoken but very tough minded Christian lady, who lived to be about 103 years old, and in perfect health almost to the day that she passed. We called her Grandma J because she was Grandma Johnson and she had been raised on a farm in North Dakota by devout Swedish Pietists. When I was in my first parish in Ritzville, Grandma J and some of the other relatives came down one Sunday morning to go to church and we were going to share dinner together in the parsonage which was just right next door to the church. I think the eves were touching on that parsonage. After dinner I went outside to putter around the flower garden which was located between the church and the parsonage, which to me was my Sunday relaxation. But Grandma J saw it quite differently than that, she had seen me out there and the minute I came in to wash up after I was finished. She was on me like a cheap suit. She did not scold me, because that was not Grandma J's style, but did give me a stern look that would melt almost any metal you could think of, and then she simply asked me a probing question "Do you think that it is a good idea for your parishioners' to see you out in the garden on the Sabbath day?" Well, I knew what her answer was, and even though I made a pretty feeble attempt to defend myself for Grandma J the matter was closed, the matter was settled, and I needed to knock it off.

Jesus, I think faced a similarly tough response to his activities on the Sabbath, in our lesson from Luke's gospel this morning as well. It is far from the only time during Jesus' ministry when he receives criticism for his Sabbath day activities. In fact there are several such instances scattered all throughout the gospels that we read on Sunday mornings. For some reason though I find this passage from Luke's gospel to be particularly interesting and at the same time a very moving passage as well. And the setting is typical, Jesus is teaching at a synagogue on the Sabbath day and a miraculous healing somehow developed in the midst of that Sabbath day service. In this case though, a woman seems to appear somewhere magically out of nowhere in need of healing. This of course was scandalous in itself because men and women were carefully segregated in the Synagogues of Jesus' day. Maybe there is a little statement here in itself that reflects the kind of raised status for women in the early Christian community. But

the scandal only builds upon itself from the differences from other healing stories. And this I find quite fascinating.

One of the differences can be found in the way Luke describes this woman's ailment. She seems to have severe arthritis even perhaps even osteoporosis as she is bent over and quite unable to stand upright. Then we were told something even more unusual, my little friend asked me an interesting question "what in the world is a crippling spirit?" because the gospel says that a crippling spirit is the cause of her ailment, which leaves us again to speculate what Luke might mean by this strange statement.

It seems to apply as Jesus does in other gospel passages that somehow our physical and spiritual wellbeing are somehow connected somehow. And they depend on each other. I believe this is true with our mental and emotional health as well, because we are holistic human beings in our makeup. And I stand by this observation despite the fact that some theologians will somehow pick us apart, to address our spiritually as we think about who we are as followers of Jesus Christ. We do have to be very careful here I think, and this is our sort of caveat that we do not simplistically look at the trials in other people's lives or somehow make judgments about what we think the cause of those trials and tribulations might be. Well things really begin to spin out of control, begin to ramp up when Jesus stops the service and calls the woman to the front of the synagogue and first he speaks these words that Lois shared with us "You are set free from your ailments" and then he lays his hands on her, and she immediately straightens up and she immediately praises God. And at that point in the story we would expect that everybody in the service would just stand up, and praise God as well. Instead the story takes a twist in a little bit different direction, as we all saw. The leader of the synagogue not only says once, but at Luke puts it, keeps saying how wrong it is for Jesus to heal this woman on the Sabbath.

Now can you imagine it, that it is wrong to heal on a Sabbath? Luke says the woman is set free from something that has ruined her life for 18 years. And the one person in the crowd that could get this, (the Grandma J person I would call it) the leader of the synagogue not only doesn't get it, but is livid that Jesus broke the Sabbath laws to do a good thing on the Sabbath day. But suffice it to say that Jesus was equally passionate as he points out, how inconsistent, how unloving, the synagogue leader appears in this story. Besides the fact that he calls the leaders attitude hypocritical, he points out that it is nonsensical there are provision in the law for the ethical treatment of livestock for heaven's sake, oxen and donkeys so why wouldn't we use the brains that God gave us to figure out how much more than to show compassion to a fellow human being on whatever day of the week it is. It is one of those Biblical standouts between the camp that says the law is the law, and Jesus on the other hand that says there is another point in the law, and that

point doesn't include ignorance, it doesn't include stupidity, or that compassion or love be put away on one day of the week. Can you imagine that if we put a sign above our door that said 'come to church on Sunday, but put your compassion and your love away when you come through the door.

Well of course the story ends with the letter of the law faction, sort of backing over, and the congregation rejoicing in God for this woman's healing. But what in the world are we to take away from this kind of fascinating story? I think my title of this sermon sort of points us in the right direction if we think about this, because no matter where we go in life, no matter what we do, we will face what Luke calls crippling spirits. And by this I mean challenges and setbacks, and failures and even tragedy that can kind of knock off our faith journey and keep us spinning our wheels in life for years and years and years like this poor woman spun her wheels for 18 years before she was able to get help.

What I think we can take away from this story, away from this passage it doesn't have to be that way. We don't have to wait for years and years to be set free of the crippling spirits in life that can weigh us down. And neither is it ever too late to turn our lives around either. Instead our faith can give us the strength and courage we need be set free the difficulties we have experienced in the past, and the hurdles that we face right now in the present time. But beyond this I think there is a longer theological point in this statement that we can take away from this that will help define who we are as followers of Jesus who love God and who love our nation on a daily basis as we go about our lives and that belief statement is this "As followers of Jesus the law of love comes before and helps to interpret every other law of faith.

Being thinking Christians God has equipped us with the tools we need to discern when we are helping or when we are harming, a neighbor around us in need. We were given intelligence we can interpret scriptures and apply those scriptures to our lives rather than blindly taking every word at literal face value. And so this passage gives us two things really, a personal statement about turning our lives around and a strong statement that defines we are of people of faith. Like the woman in the synagogue I think each of us can be set free from the crippling spirits of life and we can also be set free I think from the spiritual blindness that might lead us to neglect or even harm one of God's children as we encounter one another during the course of life. But as with the people in the synagogue as Luke puts it, we can rejoice, we can rejoice at the wonderful things that God is doing in our midst if we are open to receiving the things as well.

Together we say, Amen.