

Who are we? In this story of Jesus healing on the Sabbath day, who are we?

It's a simple story: our Lord is teaching in the synagogue. A person with a disability is in attendance, presumably having gone to worship at the synagogue as she does every Saturday. Jesus sees her and calls her to him, lays his hands on her just as he does whenever he blesses someone, and she is healed.

Let me pause right there for a moment. Imagine not seeing anything other than the patch of ground immediately around your feet. Imagine not knowing what time it is because you can't see the position of the sun in the sky. Imagine not making pictures out of the clouds with your child, or feeling the first prickles of a spring rain on your nose, or being sure of your bearings as you walk home from the market. Other than some side-long looks, that patch of dirt by your feet is all you see day in and day out. That would be a hard way to live.

The spiritual implications of this woman's physical disability in those days would be unbearable for me – she would have been the object of scorn and derision; she would be deemed non-important because, so they believed, she had done something offensive to God.

It was a common belief in those days that ailments of any kind were the direct result of sinful behavior. Of course that is really bad theology. Bad things happen to good people. It's unfortunate, but that's a reality we live with. Every Sunday, all sorts of burdens are carried into this church. Some, like the bent-over woman's condition, are more visible than others. There are knees that need replacing, treatments that must be endured. And there are financial worries, relationships in turmoil, children in unstable situations.

And yet this woman, accustomed to bearing a physical burden on her shoulders, goes to the synagogue to worship and pray, without any assumption that her circumstances will ever change. The bent-over woman came that morning, not seeking out Jesus, not expecting any sort of healing or blessing, but simply to be with God as she observes the sabbath: to hear and study the scriptures, to nourish her soul. Just another day, another shot at being faithful. Are we like her in this story?

Or are we like Jesus – recognizing those in our midst who are bent over by the burden of emotional, physical, and spiritual pain? Are we embodying the living Christ and inviting those who are hurting to come in and receive blessing? Yes, our hearts may be touched by the suffering of another, but are we the kind of faithful followers of Jesus who take that next step, to compassion, to action in response to suffering? What exactly are we doing for those with physical disabilities? With mental illness? With hungry souls and who are spiritual malnourishment? Who do we really see?

Who are we?

I'm sure you've heard about late August marking the 400th anniversary of the beginning of the slave trade in the States. Of course some slavery already existed here, what with the Native Americans being treated the way they were and slaves on non-Anglo ships having arrived prior to the Jamestown landing. But it's a useful benchmark, and is a significant part of some of the worst of our American history. 400+ years of violence and institutional discrimination is a long time for a country that is only 243 years old – those are some seriously deep and ugly roots. And it's an unfortunate reality that we – we white Americans as a whole – still treat those of African descent, Native Americans, and other non-white, non-Christian, non-heterosexual peoples as less-than ... as, well, non-important.

And so Jesus' words of judgement are not just for the religious leaders of his days, but are for us, too. By virtue of our baptismal covenant, we are religious leaders. We influence the moral barometer in our community. And we who adhere to the sensibilities of our faith often, even if unintentionally, stand in the way of liberation and healing of God's children for the sake of 'that's how it's always been done.' And so I wonder, which truths do we really hold as self-evident?

Who are we?

The leader of the synagogue makes it clear that he's not upset by the fact that Jesus performed a work of healing, or who was the recipient of his healing, or even how Jesus performed the healing. He was mad about Jesus' timing. He more or less says, 'Come back tomorrow when it's okay to perform miracles because it is offensive to God, you know, to be compassionate and merciful on the day of rest. I have seen this woman day after day as she has waited the last 18 years, she can wait one more day.'

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus ignores rules and customs that reinforce marginalization and injustice, and urges us to do likewise.

I've often thought of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the synagogue leaders back in Jesus' day as uptight, judgmental, close-minded, and moralistic. (I might point out that recent polls show that many young people see those of us who claim to be Christians the same way.) In contrast, Jesus was the ultimate outsider, sort of a first-century Clint Eastwood, who would come into town and stir things up and set them right. It was so clear, so simple: religious leaders were the bad guys, and Jesus was the good guy.¹

But despite my own close-mindedness and derision of his stereotype, the synagogue leader really does seem to be trying to do the right thing and give voice to his understanding of Truth. He's 'on the side of good.' And he truly believed Jesus was 'doing sabbath' wrong, and wants to prevent Jesus from offending God.

Jesus then explains why he's 'doing sabbath' correctly by comparing this 'daughter of Abraham' to tethered service animals. 'Even the ox and the donkey are untied and led to water on the sabbath day,' he says. These animals, of course, were understood not as pets or really even as creatures made by God, but as tools to get a day's work done – they are things of non-importance.

And so Jesus' comment makes a striking distinction: that things are inexplicably treated with more care than those who are wonderfully made in God's image. Jesus reframes for those gathered this woman's core identity – she is a daughter of Abraham, a child of God.

And Jesus goes on to point out that yes, she's waited 18 long years for release, and **now** is the time for her to be set free. **Now** is the time for mercy and compassion. **Now**. Not later. Jesus could not have faithfully spent his day with God in prayer and worship without acting with mercy and compassion. How better to use the sabbath day?

As I think about this synagogue leader, he must have woken up every morning thinking about God, said his prayers and wondered how he might serve God better. No doubt he probably didn't always get it right, but it's safe to assume that he was in fact trying. Wasn't he being faithful in the best way he knew how at the time? It strikes me how familiar he is. He and I aren't that different.

Who are we? In what ways are we stuck in old, familiar mindsets, doing things as they've always been done because we haven't bothered to think more broadly and see more clearly? In what ways are we standing in the way of someone's liberation, their healing, their ability to fully embrace the life God has given them?

¹ https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_august_25_2019

Who are we overlooking and treating – even passively – as unimportant? Despite having the best of intentions, how might we be offending God?

Who are we?

Are we like that crowd, standing by, taking it all in. They've heard the stories, they try to live faithfully and show up to the synagogue on sabbath, and they've witnessed this miracle. I wonder what the synagogue leader was hoping would happen when he tried explaining Jesus' error to the crowd? (You may recall that the crowd wasn't too pleased with Jesus' teaching back in chapter 4 – they chased him out and nearly threw him off a cliff. Detached observation that leads to praising God versus taking offense by the teaching of the carpenter's son that leads to attempted homicide: I suppose you can consider the crowd's relative uninvolvedness as a win.)

Jesus is clear: now is the time. Not later, now. Redemption, reconciliation, healing is something we are to act upon with urgency.

Whether we're addressing issues such as border detainees, women with headscarves, gender fluidity or transition, reproductive rights, gun legislation, cost of medical care, access to mental health providers, global warming, or sexual harassment and assault ... The time for personal and cultural healing is now.

Who are we?

Are we the crowd, witnessing the work of God in the world, rejoicing at Jesus' redemption, but otherwise uninvolved and standing at a distance?

Are we like the leader of the synagogue, who despite his best intentions, spends his time 'should-ing' upon God's beloved children with a narrow perspective and a 'that's-the-way-it's-always-been-done' sensibility?

Are we like the bent-over woman who seeks to give God thanks and praise at all times and in all places, regardless of our circumstances? Do we wake up every morning, grateful for another day, thanking God for another shot at being faithful?

Or are we like Jesus, seeing those in our midst who are hurting and in need of compassion, taking the initiative to act now, not waiting until a more convenient time, and offering them blessing and release?

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