

Eleventh Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/C): "Straighten Up!"

Psalm 103:1-8, Luke 13:10-17

August 20-21, 2022

Holy Trinity Lutheran, Manasquan, NJ

Show-and-Tell: a Hahne's gift certificate for "The sum of 15 dol's 00 cts." & five B Altman & Co. merchandise certificates. What is wrong with this picture?

Way too late to cash these in! Hahne's and Altman's have both gone the way of the dinosaur. So why have I kept them?? Especially because every time I see them I think, "Should've used them while I could. What a waste!" Like a can of soup that's expired in our cabinet while we wait for the perfect snowy day to open it up for lunch. These are miscalculations, oversights, lack of organization we can sadly acknowledge and then move on. **We can unburden ourselves** when we realize the futility of keeping this stuff around, get rid of it, forgive ourselves and get on with life. But there are other burdens that other people have to help lift off us.

The little lady in today's Gospel looks like she's weighed down by so heavy a burden she's bent in half. Question: is anybody here 18 or younger? Because over the course of 18 years (more than your lifetime?) her silhouette has gone from an erect exclamation point to a curved comma to an absolute question mark, totally hunched over. We can't know for sure, but maybe she had osteoporosis in a time when there were no Dexa scans, Fosamax pills or Boniva injections. Her spine was collapsing on itself and re-fusing in weird ways. As she walked, all she could see were her sandals and little puffs of dust they kicked up as she shuffled along. It was impossible for her to straighten up, and probably painful to even move her head from one side to another.

But this didn't keep her from worship. Who knows, maybe her disability even helped **drive** her to worship? We find her today in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Let's remember the people wouldn't be seated like we are, wherever we choose in the pews. As is still the case in Orthodox

Jewish synagogues, the men and the women sat in separate sections. Our little friend would have been cordoned off with the ladies. But Jesus was teaching/preaching, so He was facing the congregation and had a good view of everyone. And it sounds like our friend may have arrived a little late, with movement and noise to catch Jesus' attention, drawing His eyes to the newcomer. Jesus didn't treat her as a distraction threatening to make Him lose His train of thought, though; He treated her as a suffering sister in need of healing and a prisoner in need of liberation.

Jesus interrupts Himself to call her over. Notice that she hasn't said a word, hasn't asked for anything, and we know nothing about her faith except that **she is present in worship**. Jesus simply sees and meets her need. And she simply accepts Jesus' invitation to approach Him. *"Woman, you're free!"* (Luke 13:12b, *The Message*) Jesus makes the pronouncement then reaches out to touch her. From the outside looking in, He's breaking rules all over the place! For starters, He **speaks** to a woman. Then He **touches** a woman. Big no no. Just like touching a leper, or touching the litter on which lay the widow of Nain's dead son, or touching the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, whom everyone **except** Jesus presumed to be dead. All of those people and things were considered **contaminants** for a Jewish male. But when Jesus was involved, there was what Philip Yancey has called "reverse contagion": instead of Jesus becoming spiritually polluted, unclean, the leper becomes clean, the widow of Nain's son and Jairus' daughter are restored to life, the bent-over woman *"immediately ... stood up straight and began praising God."* (Luke 13:13)

Sadly, the miracle in the synagogue was lost on the leader of the synagogue, because it happened on the Sabbath, when work was forbidden, and for him that was an unforgivable violation of the Law, a sin that erased any good that had occurred. He didn't confront Jesus directly (maybe he was afraid to?) but instead repeated over and over to those who were there: *"Six days have been defined as work days. Come on one of the six if you want to be healed, but not on*

*the seventh, the Sabbath.*" (Luke 13:14c, *The Message*) He was a real law-and-order guy, but totally missed the lifegiving presence of the holy. Jesus called him out (and others, too) because of their blindness and lack of compassion:

*"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?"* <sup>17</sup> *When he put it that way, his critics were left looking quite silly and red-faced. The congregation was delighted and cheered him on.* (Luke 13:15-17, *The Message*)

Our Lord Jesus wants to untie us, too, from the concerns, circumstances and worries that have us tied in knots. Our Savior wants to lift the burdens we've allowed to weigh us down, the ones that bow, exhaust and cripple us. Christ wants to extract the spiritual poison that sickens our souls, deadens us to others' suffering, blinds us to others' and our own true needs. He wants to extract us from whatever stall Satan has stuffed us, bound and gagged.

Sometimes the Lord acts singlehandedly, like in today's Gospel, and other times the Lord wants us to play a part in bringing about our own or another's healing. So at times we might want to ask, "What would have to change in my life for me to be set free from this ailment or this problem?" Or "If I **were** set free, what would have to change **then**?" For example: I used to suffer from frequent migraine-like headaches. I tried physical therapy, nerve blocks, acupuncture, acupressure. In time they eased up. But others helped me realize that to keep them away I needed to do some things differently, to make changes that didn't come easily. I needed to set more realistic goals, learn to say no, set a schedule that allowed time for rest and play, for family and friends and not just work. I needed to acknowledge my true feelings, including anger, to express my true opinions and not screen what might be unpleasant for me or the other person. Jesus still works miracles, but doesn't **always**, maybe doesn't **often** do it single-handedly.

Our Lord can heal out of the blue, like in today's Gospel announcing, "You are set free!" and allowing the woman to stand up straight. Our Lord can also be more demanding and confrontative, telling us, "Straighten up and fly right!" The Holy Spirit grants us grace, opening up the desire for healing, the willingness to participate in our physical healing from illness, injury or addiction, **and** the willingness "*to lay aside every weight [every unnecessary burden] and the sin that clings so closely... [enabling us to] run with perseverance the race that is set before us.*"

(Hebrews 12:1b-c) Let's remember that *the race that is set before us* isn't intended to be a rat race.

Let's also keep in mind that the sure-fire, tried-and-true "means of grace," divine lifelines, channels for God's love to flow into our lives, are Word and Sacrament. I can't even guess at the extent of strength that comes to us through our gathering here for worship, our active hearing of the Word, our eating and drinking of the Body & Blood of Christ in this Sacrament of Holy Communion. The woman who arrived at the synagogue bent over by the burden of her illness left liberated, standing up straight. Jesus called and she answered, during worship. The man who arrived at the synagogue with a withered hand left healed and whole. The person who arrived at the synagogue as the victim of demon possession left exorcised and his own self again. Most miracles aren't that quick **or** that visible, but: "There is no such thing as a small miracle." Who's to say that our presence here today doesn't open the door to our either hoped-for or totally unexpected healing? For those with eyes to see there are miracles happening all around us, and within us as well. Let's not miss them just because they don't happen when or where or how we expect. Jesus, our Savior, wants to set each one of us free. Whatever it takes [picture Christ on the cross], no matter the cost, however long it takes, past, present or future. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

