

SERMON – AUGUST 25th

At the beginning of today's gospel reading, we find Jesus, teaching, on the Sabbath, in a synagogue, in Judea. In first century Israel this was not at all unusual. Once a week Jewish people gathered together for public worship, perhaps in some ways a bit like us. The service was likely structured in five parts – there were prayers, singing, blessings, readings from the Scriptures and commentaries on sacred passages. And while there was often a synagogue leader who was distinguished because of his teaching any Jew who felt himself qualified could ask for permission to teach. So the fact that Jesus was teaching on this particular Sabbath day in a synagogue in Judea would have been viewed as nothing out of the ordinary.

However, on this particular day, some way into his teaching, Jesus sees a woman – a woman who was bent over – the text tells us that she was a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. Upon seeing this woman Jesus acts in a way that was totally unexpected – and completely out of the ordinary. He stops teaching. He simply stops. All eyes on him – and in that moment he moves, he moves in order to accommodate just one woman – one woman who is bent – one woman who is different. Woman, he says, you are set free from your bondage.

Now, in mentioning the woman's bondage Jesus brought attention to the two-fold nature of her suffering. While the woman's bent body likely prevented her from doing the normal, practical everyday things that most others did it likely also contributed to her place or belonging within the community – her physical and behavioral differences probably brought about the scorn, isolation and disdain of others. She was a woman who looked different, she was a woman who behaved differently and she was a woman who was not usually made so welcome during public worship.

Upon making her way forward Jesus places his hands upon her and immediately she is healed. Right there in the middle of a public worship service on the Sabbath. Jesus had moved to accommodate another - he had moved to include, he had moved in order to welcome, he had moved so that one woman might be healed, he had moved so that one woman might find wholeness. In her response the woman stands and praises God.

This is a good news gospel type story. A story that demonstrates God's intentions towards humanity – towards us. It's a story whereby Jesus acts and moves to bring an end to suffering, exclusion and isolation. A story whereby Jesus moves to bring healing, restoration, welcome and inclusion. This is the Jesus we often read about, the Jesus we often hear about and yes for many, if not all of us here today, this is the Jesus we long to encounter.

Or is it? Do we really desire to encounter this Jesus – the one who acts, the one who moves to transform and bring wholeness so that another might experience life in all its fullness? What happens when His actions to heal, to include and to welcome all people interrupts us or challenges the way that we do things –are we really as welcoming of this Jesus as we think we are?

In today's gospel reading we discover someone who did not appreciate or welcome Jesus act to heal, his move to welcome and transform another. You see in his act to heal, in his move to bring about wholeness he changed the way public worship in a synagogue on a Sabbath was done. The text tells us that the leader of the synagogue was indignant. He was angry. He was upset and he was annoyed. The Sabbath, he tells all those gathered together, is a time to rest – a time to worship:

There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those six days, not on the Sabbath.

Now, in his response the synagogue leader does not in any way suggest that he was against the healing or transformation of another – in fact it is highly probable that he was all for welcoming and healing. His beef with Jesus was about timing – today, is not the day for being personal, today is not the day for welcoming those who look different, today is not the day to include those who behave differently, today is not the day for easing the suffering of one who is excluded - Today, being the Sabbath, is the day for public worship. Jesus should have waited.

Jesus confronts the synagogue leader directly and sharply. The laws and traditions – the way that we do things on the Sabbath, are no excuse for prolonging the suffering and exclusion of just one person - even by just one day. In fact, the purpose of the Sabbath law actually expresses why Jesus should in fact restore the woman on this day. In Deuteronomy Chapter 5 scripture declares that at its heart the Sabbath is a day that is set aside to provide relief and a share in the peace, rest, wholeness, dignity and justice that is God's intention for all of humanity. The Sabbath is in fact the perfect day for welcoming and including those who are different.

Jesus criticized the synagogue leader for having a mistaken view of Scripture – and for ignoring just how urgently God desires to see human wholeness restored. A theological principle of waiting – a theology which expects God's blessings to come in the future is no reason for failing to act, failing to move or to accommodate another when suffering and exclusion are present.

The story in today's gospel reading tells us how different people responded when Jesus moved to change the way people worshipped in order to welcome and include to bring about healing and wholeness. This story causes me to wonder how we might respond if Jesus were here today. If he stopped us. If he moved to change the way that we worship in order to welcome one who looks different, one who behaves differently so that they might be transformed into wholeness.

I wonder if we, like the people gathered together in the synagogue that day, might rejoice.

I wonder if we, like the synagogue leader from his place of comfort and privilege might seek to use scripture, theology, tradition – the way that we do things, to challenge and confront the need for immediate action, the need for us to move and to accommodate another into a place of wholeness.

Or is it possible that we might respond as one woman did. Is it possible that we might be that one person Jesus stops for, that one person Jesus moves to accommodate and call forward - that one person who is welcomed, healed and made whole. I wonder, then, if we too might stand and praise God.