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Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalms 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

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Grace and peace to you.

Eighteen years. I can't imagine. That's a long time to be "bent double, quite incapable of standing up straight." Can you imagine? In a time without buses, taxis, without modern medicine, without aid workers, walkers and canes and wheelchairs or Tylenol or Ibuprofen – to help get you around or to simply lessen the pain. Eighteen years of bearing the weight of shame that accompanied being unwell. You can bet that people looked at her, at best with pity, because her sickness was "caused by a spirit." That kind of spirit is never good news, but a curse, a judgment, a labeling of one who had done something wrong, someone who had fallen out of favor with God. And if you didn't know what that something was, then you were best to keep your distance. You know, who wants to catch what she has whether it was biologically contagious or simply by association and then you could end up categorized alongside of her as unclean, unworthy. No, steer a wide birth.

Suffering. People suffer for reasons unknown with all kinds of illnesses and we are modern enough to understand that it is not because of a "spirit," but by biological mishap or natural decline. Still, I know there is an aspect of shame when one is suddenly diagnosed with any label whether it be cancer, or dementia, autism, ADD, ALS – well - it doesn't matter what the initials or name is, we are faced with a failure of our bodies and the subtle changes in relationships that come beside them. Perhaps we are not shunned, but there is a shift in our place in society, families and friends.

When I first read this story this week, I wondered, "eighteen years – why did she have to wait so long for healing? Why didn't Jesus or God do something earlier?" I mean, didn't God know? Did God not care? Could God not have done something? These are the usual

questions we ask when bad things happen. Sometimes it even causes us to doubt that God exists at all, because what kind of god would sit on the sidelines when there is so much need in the world? These are not small questions.

When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor, Erwin Buck told us, "When there's a woman in the gospel story, pay attention, because something radical is happening." This would be a far different tale if it were one of healing a man, because the restoration of a man meant his return to work and providing for his family and regaining his place in the family line and social circles. But this woman's healing has actually little benefit at all – she is likely passed the marry-able or childbearing age and if that's the case she holds little social value. What could possibly be so radical about this woman? Nothing really, except for her role in helping to tell us about Jesus and to help point us to our lives as followers.

Jesus heals her on the Sabbath. It's well known that even healing was considered "work" and that best practices dictated that one was not to work on the Sabbath. As God rested on the 7th day of making everything, so too we are to take a day of rest. This was a serious matter, so serious that it became a Law for the Jewish people to abide by and actually remained in favor with Christians for thousands of years. I'm sure many of you remember when there wasn't much open on Sundays. Most people went to church and then visited in the afternoon, even farmers rested from the field whether it was rain or sun. In Jesus' time, to work on the Sabbath was to break the Law, a fact pointed out by the head of the synagogue (can you imagine getting arrested for shopping on a Sunday?) Perhaps he wanted to be sure to point out Jesus' transgression so others would be appropriately warned. The synagogue leader might have said something like, "take two pills and call me on Monday," but Jesus said, "well, I'm here right now!"

Which brings us to the brief encounter between the woman and Jesus. He's teaching, sees her, calls her over and immediately pronounces her cured! Very simple, very direct. It's not that he's

been teaching there for 18 years and now decided to do something, but *as soon as he notices her* he reacts. What's missing are is a line of questioning, "tell me what you did," or "tell me how this happened." There are no x-rays or painkillers or physiotherapy, just healing. She didn't have to convince him or justify herself (like on America's Got Talent – they ask the contestants "what would you do with \$1million?") or even say what she would do with her newfound health. Her restoration was 100% gift with no strings attached. That's how Jesus works. He knows that love doesn't have price or parameters.

And this part of the story, I think, is the part that points most clearly to us, in terms of teaching us what it means to live as God's people today. Quite often we wait and hope for Jesus to intervene into the dark places of our lives, to the hidden places where we are weighed down with suffering. We pray in our bedrooms behind closed doors for health, for wayward children, for aging parents, for the grief we can't get through. We try to be good people so that when our time of need comes Jesus won't look away, but pay attention; we earned it. But, I think this story is deeper than that, because Jesus is modelling how we are to act.

My thesis is, if we are the body of Christ, if Christ dwells within us, then we have no need to wait for Jesus to show up. Christ is already here. You and I are the embodiment of the Holy One, ordained to do as Jesus exemplified: see the need, help as you are able, and to do so without price or parameters. Very simple, very direct. What we learn is that we have been given the gifts, the skills, the commission to continue the work of Jesus. Actually, we are called to do so.

The author of Hebrews says, "What you have come to is nothing known to the senses: not a blazing fire, or a gloom turning to total darkness, or a storm, or trumpeting thunder, or the great voice speaking..." Which is to say, that God is not distant, not disembodied, not foreign, not unknown. God is here.

Which I find to be amazingly liberating! And a lot of responsibility. We become the ones to call over somebody in need and figure out our own way to heal them. This same pattern happens in many ways, in the world coming together to preserve the Amazon Rain Forrest, in researchers who discover new treatments, in teachers who guide young minds, in construction and maintenance workers who build our shelter and keep things running smoothly – and the list goes on. But these things are not just “work,” not just a way to make a living/money – do we dare to see them as God in us continuing to create?

And on the other side, when we are the one “bent over” with burden, we don’t have to hide it, but trust in others to help us. It gives us permission to allow others to see our vulnerabilities. It erases the shame we sometimes feel because of the burdens we carry. Imagine a day when there is no shame or embarrassment or questions anymore about looking, speaking, differently, about mental illness or addiction, but just a pure openness whereby we may be healed? How different from the world this is. We’re trying, but we have a long way to go.

May we be empowered to live as the family of God now and not just wait for some end time in heaven. See, invite, heal - be good news for one another. Amen.