

“Not By The Rules” – Luke 13:10-17 – Aug 26, 2007

When I started working on this sermon I was wrapped up in being all serious ... you know the kind of opening: “Can you imagine the commotion here in the sanctuary if the healing event described in our gospel reading took place during our service of worship?!” However, it wasn’t too long before I realized that approach wasn’t working. I think it was the fact that I kept grinning as I read the story that helped me to realize that while there are some serious undertones and a very serious message, this story was meant to be enjoyed. In fact, it has many of the characteristics of Jewish standup comedy.

Let’s review the story: Jesus is teaching in church – well, synagogue actually, but you get the picture – on the Sabbath. A woman appears, who is visibly disabled, has been for years. Jesus calls to her – Oy, woman, you are set free! – and she is set free and begins praising God. The synagogue leader gets all huffy and petulant, doesn’t attack Jesus but carps at the crowd. In a standup routine he would be parodied as an archetypical nerdy Jewish teenager, complete with a whiney voice – “you can’t do that, the rules are clear ... six days to come and get healed, but not on the Sabbath day!” Jesus then neatly puts him down 1-2-3, badda-bing, badda-boom, I’m here ‘til Thursday. The crowd goes wild, except for “all his opponents.” In many ways it’s an amusing story, meant to bring a knowing smile to the faces of Jesus’ supporters and a cheer from the faithful for their champion who has once again with a word overcome the forces of evil. I haven’t checked yet but I’m sure the new book Gillan is all excited about, the “Manga Messiah” nicely depicts this scene in such heroic terms.

However, for all of its superficial humour and heroicism, this story does also present a number of serious issues to consider. The first of these is that this is NOT a story about the woman’s faith. We are told that she has had this infirmity – attributed to a malign spirit – for some eighteen years, and so we are tempted to leap to the assumption that she has been attending church – well, synagogue – for those eighteen years, but there’s no proof of that one way or the other. She could well have come for the first time in eighteen years having heard about this charismatic new teacher – we could speculate madly like the announcers do on CNN, but the truth is we just don’t know. We do have a testimony to her faith in that she began praising God the minute she was cured and stood up straight. But there is not a word from her – faithful or otherwise – before the healing. She was not healed, so far as we have evidence, on the basis of declaring faith in Jesus – either in general or for specific healing powers. Jesus took the initiative here, calling out to her first, and declaring in his opening call that she was healed. Actually, he used the expression “set free” and he would return to that same theme in his counter-attack on the leader of the synagogue. But the initiative clearly belonged to Jesus.

Another key point we need to note was that Jesus did not enter the synagogue to disrupt the worship. He was there as part of that worship, indeed leading worship. This is an important point. At first glance this story is seen as, is taken as, and is used as justification for attacks on the church. At a superficial level it seems to be an attack by Jesus on the religious institution – but note that here he was a legitimate part of that institution. His attack was instead on the rigidity of those who were using the religious establishment to hold power over the people. His protest was against those who seemed to miss the point of God setting his people free and kept finding new ways to bind them with inflexible rules.

That’s a protest that rings with relevance today, doesn’t it? Speaking of CNN did you have a chance to watch their specials this week on “God’s Warriors” done wonderfully by Christiane Amanpour? She had three two-hour specials, one each on Jewish fundamentalists, Muslim fundamentalists, and Christian fundamentalists. One thing that was abundantly held in common among all three fundamentalist groups was the overwhelming tendency of all three to impose rigid, inflexible and oppressive rules on their followers. The terrifying part – may God preserve us from

fundamentalists of any stripe – was that all three desperately want to impose the same rules on everyone else! A resulting significant common factor among all three fundamentalist groups was the complete lack of grace, either attributed to God or offered to the faithful.

Jesus' protest was not against religious institution – he was part of the institution of his day, and founded the church that bears his name. His protest is against those who would abuse the religious institution, the synagogue then and the church today, misrepresenting God as rule-based instead of grace-based. Let's go back for a moment to what he said in response to the challenge by the leader of the synagogue. Jesus had said to the woman, "you are set free ...," and he used an example of an exception to the law allowing beasts of burden to be untied on the Sabbath to underscore his point. And then he referred to the woman as "a daughter of Abraham," asking should she not be set free? It whooshes by over our heads, but the synagogue leader – and the assembled worshipping Jews – could not miss the reference to Abraham as meaning that the woman was heir to the promises – and thus the grace - of God. And no worshipping Jew could miss in the words "set free" the connection with that pivotal event that defined the Jewish people – the Exodus – and the grace shown by God in passing over the children of Israel, celebrated to this day in the Passover. Those in that synagogue could not help but hear in the words of Jesus an echo of Moses' declaration to the Pharaoh: "Let my people go!"

Jesus was not attacking the institution of religion; he was attacking those – primarily clergy, but also related toadies – who would hide behind the trappings of religion to wield power over the people. Another somewhat harsher version of the same message is offered in Matthew 23:4 – "*They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.*" Jesus was attacking the lack of grace proclaimed and worse yet the lack of grace practiced in the church of his day ... and that attack is still relevant today.

Recall once more by contrast the radical grace exhibited by Jesus in this story. Jesus, on his own initiative, healed the woman. Those who insist – wrongly, in my understanding – that the blessings of God only come in response to long, obedient, and public faith would love to claim that the woman was healed because of eighteen long years of suffering faith. But to be truly biblical, to do complete justice to the text, they have to admit along with us that we have no clue as to the woman's faithfulness. She could have attended the synagogue merely to receive their equivalent of a social security cheque, as the synagogue was the only place she could get money, or social assistance as it's called here today. We could postulate that she was there because it was a great place to "touch up" the faithful for alms. We simply don't know because the text doesn't tell us, and so we – and those who would claim to be "biblical" – have to acknowledge that the healing by Jesus was an act of radical grace, the goodness of the power of God exercised for no reason other than to show mercy.

However, the story ends on a happy note, with the crowd rejoicing in support of Jesus and all the wonderful things he was doing. The story continues on a happy note, for not all in today's church is a story of missing that point of radical grace. Sometimes the rules get bent, and justice is done. In many places we hear encouraging news that the message of God's love for the people is paramount, and the gospel of reconciliation in and through Christ's action – not ours – is preached, heard, and lived. Sometimes it's the blessed noise of children in the sanctuary – other times it's the joy of laughter in worship – yet other times it's the chaos of serving food to hungry neighbours – on the Sabbath, even! ... these are all signs that the message of the radical grace of God in Christ Jesus is being preached, is being heard, is being lived. These are signs that it is not by the rules that we are saved, reconciled and made whole with God, but it is by God's radical grace in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom with that crowd in the synagogue we join in rejoicing in the wonderful things he has done, and is doing in our lives.