

Sermon: Keeping Track of the Easy Part

Year C, Proper 16

[Jeremiah 1:4-10](#); [Psalm 71:1-6](#); [Hebrews 12:18-29](#); [Luke 13:10-17](#)

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Rev. Catherine A. Merrill

What would it have been like for the woman who appeared in the synagogue that day. She had been crippled for 18 years, unable to stand up straight. Let's just sit with that for a moment.

Our bodies are designed to stand up straight. All the muscles and tendons are designed to keep us upright. We all remember our babies when they had to gain the muscle strength in their necks and shoulders and backs to keep the big heavy weight at the top of their shoulders from flopping around. We are made to stand up straight and to walk upright, with the muscles in our legs and hips all set up to keep us moving through the world upright. So even if she had been that way for 18 years, how much pain must she have been in, all day, every day, because her body couldn't conform to the shape it was designed for.

Now think of her moving through the world. She was probably on foot all the time, so think of all the steps and gates she had to navigate, the number of things she walked into or bumped against because she couldn't see them coming. Think of how difficult it would be to sit down, because all the chairs or benches or cushions were made for people who stand up straight. Think of eating, and how much would spill. Think of drawing water and carrying it home to cook or wash in, when her body was already struggling to adapt its propulsion systems designed for upright walking.

Now think of the community around her. Like most people she probably lived in a village, but the village was big enough to have a synagogue, so it must have been one of the larger ones with 25 families or so. There's no way you can't invite her to a celebration. But who wants to sit across from her and watch the food spill everywhere. Or sit next to her, when she probably can't stay still and frankly probably smells a bit more than everyone else because washing is so much harder for her. What would it be like to be the person who always stands out, who is always being taken care of and never getting to do for anyone else?

So on the day that she hears that that healer is coming, that man from the North Country, what must it have been like? There had been other healers that had come through. If they couldn't help her, they likely blamed her for committing some sin that had cause her body to twist into a knot. And if it wasn't her that had done something wrong, perhaps her parents or even her children had done something wrong and she was being punished by God for the sin. Every healer that had failed to heal her could blame *her* for her predicament and go on their way without anyone thinking any less of *them*.

What must it have been like to have this Galilean coming to town, someone known for both his ability to interpret the sacred stories and his ability to cure intractable diseases? There had to be a ton of gossip about him. Was he the real deal or not? Was he just a showman? Was he dangerous to know? Some people must have walked out of the village in the days before, to meet Jesus as he came on his way, to hear him speak and see him heal. But she couldn't. Her body just wouldn't let her make that journey. And the way it works out, he shows up on the Sabbath.

Now maybe everybody else is psyched, because they have more time to hear him speak, hear him teach. But for her, it's devastating. Because on the Sabbath you do no work. So he couldn't heal her. By the next day, this young strong man, walking upright, would be completely beyond her reach.

Now, she's been crippled for 18 years. There have been other healers in the past. There will be others in the future. Maybe she's gotten used to the awkward way her body moves through the world. Maybe the running battle she has with the family who always tethers their goat where she'll trip over it is just part of the race she's been set, to use a phrase from last week. Maybe Jesus' reputation is a little bit better than most, so she really wants him to try. Maybe she's been in more pain in the last fourth months than in the last four years and she'll try anything, however unlikely it is to work. Maybe she knows perfectly well that no one can heal on the Sabbath, but you go to the synagogue on the Sabbath. So she goes, just to hear what this man from Galilee has to say.

Luke says she "appeared". (Luke 13:11) And perhaps it was a made for TV moment, where everyone has settled down to listen, but because her pace is slow, she's the last one in, standing in the bright light of the doorway of the darker synagogue. But it could equally have been that she came in a group of women and children and just showed up, like any one of you, climbing up those steep stairs in the back of the church.

Jesus calls her over. (Luke 13:12) And this is where she makes a deliberate decision. While women could go to the synagogue, they were expected to stay in the background. Other healers would have explained away her crippled body as being caused by sin. There's no guarantee that this Galilean isn't going to make an even bigger spectacle of her there in the synagogue on the Sabbath. This stranger who is calling her over will be gone in the morning. She will still be in the village, still dependent on the community to help her manage her daily life in a world set up for people who stand straight up. It's the Sabbath, the one day a week when he can't heal her. With all that downside and no real upside at all, she goes to him. Because we know what happens next, it's easy to skip over this moment of profound courage..

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment," he says. And lays his hands on her. And she stands up straight. (Luke 13:12-13) Let's just sit with that for a moment.

If your body is used to being bent over, even if it suffered and was painful because our bodies are designed to be straight up, think what it must have felt like to stand up. It must have hurt, to have muscles and tendons so long used to moving only a small distance now return to their full range. Her sandals would have been worn in places because of the way her feet hit the ground when she walked bent over. Standing up straight, they must have felt awful, like they had stones in them. Chances are very good she would have had her hair covered, but imagine standing up straight, in the synagogue, feeling your headscarf slipping over your hair, and your sense of modesty crying out to catch it.

But, oh, imagine what it was like to stand up. Even as it hurt, there must have been such an adrenaline storm running through her. She could carry water and firewood like everyone else. She could do all the normal things, sitting and sleeping, walking and eating. She wouldn't run into that stupid goat anymore. However much pain she was in in that moment, it would end. And at the end, she would be facing the world like everyone else. No wonder she began praising God.

If it had been me, I would probably have been shouting and crying and grabbing my headscarf and trying to keep my balance in my sandals that no longer felt like they were on the right feet. And if it had been me and the leader of the synagogue was indignant, saying I shouldn't have been healed on the Sabbath (Luke 13:14), I probably would have forgotten about everything else and I would have smacked him, barefoot, with my hair uncovered and my muscles screaming for having side armed someone while standing upright. And if my position in the village wasn't precarious enough, smacking the leader of the synagogue, in the synagogue, in front of the whole community, on the Sabbath, might well have sealed my fate, just as my body was restored to me.

Jesus takes care of that for her. Jewish law was explicit about keeping the Sabbath, but it was equally explicit that caring for animals was expected. Jesus uses the understanding that caring for animals is expected to point out what the leader of the synagogue has forgotten. Oxen and donkeys are property. When we care more for our property than we do for our community, then we have forgotten what God has given us the Sabbath for, to remain connected with God's abundance.

Sabbath is the day when we check in with the big picture, that's why we are encouraged to do no productive work. Work has a tendency to pull us down into the details. Sabbath is the day when we remember that God has loved us before we were formed in our mothers' wombs, before anyone else loved us, God did (Jeremiah 1:5). Sabbath is the day when we remember that God has consecrated all of us for a purpose before we were born (Jeremiah 1:5). Sabbath is the day when we take the time to remember and look at the big picture and see how we connect with the purpose God has for our lives.

Jesus reminds the leader of the synagogue of the real purpose of the Sabbath and the whole community rejoices (Luke 13:17). So in that sense, Jesus has healed the community as well as the crippled woman. In the following weeks and months, maybe years, she'll be brought forth at every community supper, every time there's a newcomer to town, they'll tell that person her story. She'll testify and praise God again. Her story will always include the part where Jesus reminds the leaders of the synagogue of the real purpose of the Sabbath. Most folks will be convinced that her purpose from God is to testify to what it is like to be healed by the power of God and to live a full life, standing up right, facing the world.

But I wonder if in her heart, that's what she believed. She lived for 18 years, cramped and twisted. She lived in pain and dependent on the community. When she went to the synagogue that day, healing could only have been a wistful if-only-he'd-shown-up-on-another-day. When Jesus called her to him, there was so little upside and so much downside. And she went anyway. Perhaps God had consecrated her not just to be healed, but face the world made for upright people as a cripple. Perhaps God has consecrated her to nourish the courage to answer Jesus' summons when it came.

It's easy to say that being healed was the purpose of her life. But perhaps we are missing the real purpose because we will not imagine what it took to come to that moment of healing. Keeping Sabbath helps us keep hold of the big picture, keep hold of the decisions that lead up to the big flashy moments. Answering Jesus' call may be the moment we were made for, no matter how hard or unlikely it is. Everything that comes after that may be the easy part.