

13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 22, 2010
"Set Free"
St. Luke 13:10-17

"And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound, to be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" St. Luke 13:16

WOMAN UNBENT
(Luke 13:10-17)

That Sabbath day as always
she went to the synagogue
and took the place assigned her
right behind the grill where,
the elders had concurred,
she would block no one's view,
she could lean her heavy head,
and (though this was not said)
she'd give a good example to
the ones who stood behind her.

That day, intent as always
on the Word (for eighteen years
she'd listened thus), she heard
Authority when Jesus spoke.

Though long stripped
of forwardness,
she came forward, nonetheless,
when Jesus summoned her.

"Woman, you are free
of your infirmity," he said.

The leader of the synagogue
worked himself into a sweat
as he tried to bend the Sabbath
and the woman back in place.

but she stood up straight and let
god's glory touch her face.

- Irene Zimmerman from "Incarnation"

Jesus' ministry is about freedom.

Christ comes to set us free. In his first public sermon at his home town synagogue in Nazareth he read from the scroll of the prophet, Isaiah:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free."*

Why should anyone be surprised that on the Sabbath he sets people free? Christ is very clear about his mission from the beginning and he is simply doing what God called him to do: 'let the oppressed go free.'

This is such an interesting passage yet its familiarity may blind us to the nuances and arguments going on between first century Christianity and Judaism. Christ is in a rabbinical discussion here. It is a conversation with the Pharisees. Judaism is more conversational with its sacred text than most of Christianity. *"The 'Bible' said it and so that is it"* does not apply to how God's people worked with the Law.

Rather what does it mean today? How do we interpret the Sabbath law in this time and place and under these circumstances here and now? Each generation must wrestle with God's word and re-interpret it in its context. It is a living word with which we converse not a static book of laws.

In the Gospels we are privy to heated discussions between Jesus and the religious authorities of his day.

So in the first century Jesus is re-interpreting the Sabbath Laws not based on strict obedience but through the lens of compassion. God is a God of mercy and of justice. How do mercy and justice work together to make of a caring community?

Who is really bent over and bound up in this passage? Is it just this woman? Or is Christ revealing that the religious authorities are just as bound up and bent over their strict interpretation of the Sabbath Law.

Christ sets the woman free and she praises God.

Christ set the religious authorities free and rather than rejoice in the gift of freedom, they remain smug in their self-righteousness.

A colleague and friend of mine, Carrie Smith is pastor at Capron Lutheran Church. One of our members while traveling by on a recent trip noticed the saying on the Capron Lutheran Church signboard:

“God wants spiritual fruits not religious nut.”

That is what this passage is about: God is looking for the spiritual fruits of compassion not the religious nuts of legalism.

The issue of bondage and freedom is the central message of this text. In other words Jesus is saying:

“Hello! Strict adherents to the letter of the Law. If you can unbind your donkey and feed and water it on the Sabbath and not count it as work – how much more do I have the freedom to set a person free from her ailment?

And by the way – also set you free from your own bondage to the myriad of add on rules you have made for the Law?”

We have two cripples here – the Law-keeper and the bent over woman and Jesus heals both of them: one rejoices in their freedom – the other clings to the letter of the Law.

Set free!

Anthony DeMello, priest and spiritual director tells this story:

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in the nest of a backyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

All his life the eagle did what the backyard chickens did, thinking he was a backyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked.

*"That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor.
"He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth – we're chickens."*

So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was. [Source: Anthony DeMello, The Song of the Bird]

Christ comes to heal and set free. Christ comes to show us that we are not merely sinful or like chickens that belong to the ground – but we are God's sacred children – set free to fly like the golden eagle.

We are free. Our freedom goes back to the font. We are born from our mothers bend inward. We are born from God in baptism unbound and open. Through baptism we died with Christ. The waters of baptism are not only the waters of the death of the old you, but also the waters of new life.

We are born free. We did not free ourselves – but like the bent over woman – God freed us. In Christ we rise each day as new and free people. The risen Christ set us free from all the ugly forces lurking in the shadows of our life. Sin, death, the Law no longer keep us in bondage.

Baptism is given once – yet, it is a reminder of our many deaths. God calls us to put aside and die to the many security blankets that our families, our church, or our society insist are necessary for faith or for success.

Although we may be frightened by our finitude and intimidated by the forces of evil, we are free from their final threats!

Christ set us free from our bent over inwardness to stand up straight and to look out on the creation with compassion. The worth, dignity, and identity of everyone is as important as my own worth, dignity, and identity. Wherever people are forced to be less than human and less than free, God's people are called to their side.

Christ cries out to us: "Church you are set free!"

And our proper response is to stand up straight and praise God.

Amen

