

11 Pentecost, Proper 16, Yr. C
August 25, 2019
Isaiah 58:9b-14, Luke 13:10-17

This morning, I'd like to look at both the first reading and the Gospel because they shed light on one another. If we start with the Gospel, I think it's helpful to realize that there are a number of levels on which it can be read. The first level is the healing of the woman who, the text says, had been bent over for 18 years. Think about that for a minute. What would that be like, seeing nothing but the dirt and people's sandals, without further contorting your body to see anything else. She doesn't ask Jesus to heal her. Given her condition, it's possible that she couldn't even see him. But he saw her and when he did, he called her over and, in the language in the text, tells her that she is "set free" from her ailment. And she stands up straight and begins praising God.

There's another level here that I'd like us to think about. You'll note that she's not named. In his commentary on this text, William Willamon speculates that her whole identity was wrapped up in her disability. She was seen as the "bent woman" and probably identified that way when people talked about her. Think for a minute about names and how important it is for us to be named and known. Remember the TV series Cheers? As I remember it, the theme song described that bar as the place where everybody knew your name. It met you belonged, you were welcome. I believe I've told some of you the story about being in The Pig and having a woman stop me and say, "It's been AGES since I've seen you." And I'm standing there, desperately trying to remember her name or some way that I could return the recognition and, then saved by the bell, she looked at me once again and said, "But that's maybe because I don't know who you are!" We both got a laugh out of that and had a bit of a chat, but once again, names and recognition are crucial. Go back to the reading and the line, "when Jesus SAW her..." What did he see? More than a bent woman, he saw and he later names her, a "daughter of Abraham." He saw through to the essence of her, to the fact that she was a beloved child of God, an heir to the promises, blessed and meant to be a blessing to others. There's a challenge here for us. When we look at others, what do we see? Do we stop at the surface and see only skin color? Or gender? Or disability? Can we look in a way that allows us to see who the person is – a beloved child of God? Here's another reference to an old TV show. Remember the Loretta Young Show? When I think of it, I remember her VERY slim waist and the way she'd whirl through the gate with her very full skirt. The only show I remember was one in which she and her husband owned a farm and they were losing it and there was a conversation in which she was challenged to name their deepest identity and she did: we are beloved children of God.

Another layer is presented by the leader of the synagogue. He's not named either, but he doesn't have to be. He's protected by his position and his authority. And he raises

his voice to object to this healing. Wait a minute – this isn't OK – it's working on the Sabbath – it could have waited until tomorrow! Looking at this part of the text raises several issues:

First of all, this fellow is portrayed as a heartless legalist. But the caution here is that all of us can fall into that way of thinking. If the rules are working in our favor, we can insist on the status quo. The second thing is to remember that we're all coming from a different perspective. He's trying to keep the Sabbath holy according to some of the commands in Deuteronomy. From his point of view, this woman has had this affliction for 18 years; what could one more day possibly matter? That reminds me of a story told by Lincoln when he was presented with the argument by slave owners that slavery was a benevolent institution. His reply was something to the effect that he wasn't seeing any of the owners willing to switch places. Talk is cheap and perspective matters.

So, here's another layer for us to look at. It's the challenge for us to remember to look beyond rules to the principles behind them. What's the rule there for in the first place? In this case, Deuteronomy was about worshiping God and part of that was keeping the Sabbath as a holy day. Think of the third commandment: "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy." One way of honoring this commandment was to remember that when God created the world, he rested and we are to do the same, spending the day focused on God and not on business as usual. But the point of doing that was to allow us to become more like God, to learn to love as God loves, to care about those God cares about. And here's where the Isaiah reading lays it out plainly: remove the yoke of suffering, the speaking of evil – offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted – that's what it means to put God first, that's what it means to worship me. If you live like that, God says through Isaiah, then your light will "burst like the dawn." So the two Sabbath commands are really two sides of the same coin: we worship God by how we treat others. So there was the rule, which said "no work on the Sabbath" and lots of interpretation about what "work" mean, which is where the leader of the synagogue got stuck. But the principle behind the rule was the principle of liberation from suffering, reflecting a God who created in love, liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and wanted them to follow him by lifting the burden of oppression whether it was found.

In one of her books, Rachel Remen (*Kitchen Table Wisdom*) tells of a time in her pediatric practice when she was treating a 12-year old Jewish girl for cancer. The treatments were on a tight schedule and it turned out that one of them would fall on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year for Orthodox Jews. The girl's father was a deeply traditional Rabbi. Here again there was the issue of work on a holy day and, since it was too far for the girl to walk, the father wanted to skip the treatment. He and the doctor when around about this for a while and he said that he would consult with his own Rabbi for an opinion. When the treatment day came, the girl was there with both

her mother and her father. When Dr. Remen asked about it, the father said that his rabbi had told him that he should get a taxi and that he and his daughter should ride together. When he protested, his teacher insisted that he accompany his daughter so that, he said, “She will know that even the most pious and upright man in her life, her father, may ride on the holiest day of the year for the purpose of preserving life.

Both Isaiah and Jesus are talking about the same thing – the nature of true religion. Worship is essential, but so is the kind of life that follows from worship, a life of loving-kindness, justice and compassion. Both of them are warning against systems or understandings where we can miss the forest for the trees – where we don’t get the underlying purpose of the rules for which the system was put in place in the first place. You’ll remember Jesus tied God with what a life that puts God first together when he got up in the synagogue and quoted from Isaiah, saying: The spirit of the Lord is upon me, He has anointed me and sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to let the oppressed go free...”

That’s our call, our vocation as well. There’s still much work to be done, still many yokes to be lifted, still many acts of reconciliation and kindness to be performed.

Yesterday, I received an e-mail about the National Park Service has asked churches with bells to ring them at 3 this afternoon to remember the fact that it was 400 years ago, in 1619, that the first enslaved Africans were landed in this country. That one act set off a cascade of oppression and suffering that still reverberates four centuries later. I wish we had bells, but in lieu of that, I ask you to pause this afternoon, to remember, to lament and to pray for the long-awaited reconciliation. That would surely be an act of worship. Amen.

