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The 11th Sunday after Pentecost

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Early in Jesus' ministry, he came to the temple in Nazareth, and when handed the scroll to read, opened to Isaiah 61 and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And then he said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." From the outset, Jesus has claimed his purpose as the incarnate son of God. He's come to proclaim the Good news of salvation and hope. He's come to set prisoners and the oppressed free; to restore sight to those who do not or will not see, to liberate.

Jesus came to continue the holy work begun by God when God's people, enslaved in Egypt, were liberated into the promised land; He is the living embodiment of the words so eloquently spoken by his mother in response to God's calling of her to birth God's son into being. Throughout his ministry we have watched and witnessed as Jesus does what he said he came to do. And each time, it catches us up. As much as we wish to believe and subscribe, each time Jesus does the miraculous, we may find ourselves grappling to make sense of it.

What comes to your mind when you hear the word "liberation"? In the simplest sense, to be liberated is to be set free. We might think of our enslaved siblings of color who fought for and were liberated from their bondage of slavery; or a prisoner released from prison after serving their sentence. We might note any group of people who at some time in their existence, or maybe even still today, have been disallowed the full expression of their personhood, as they are blatantly denied access or rights freely given to others. For some of us, liberation might mean being declared cancer-free, or that a loved one in death no longer suffers in body, mind or spirit. However we think of it, liberation is the work of God, is showcased in Jesus', and is central to today's gospel story.

As we often do, we find Jesus in the synagogue, teaching. Looking up, he sees a woman. We do not know her name. Until this moment she has gone unnoticed, seemingly invisible, someone who no one wants to talk to because she's different. Luke tells us that she is crippled, bent over and quite unable to stand straight. Take a moment right now, lean forward in your pew as best you can and look down. What do you see? ...Yes, only the floor and your feet. Imagine that this has been her only vantage point for many years, that it has been ages since she last encountered someone eye to eye?

But here she is, on the fringes of the synagogue. Perhaps she has come to listen — to hear the teachings, hungry to be fed, hungry for hope? There on the margins it was not she that sought Jesus, but rather, Jesus who seeing her, called her over to him. It was not she who came asking to be healed from the 18-year affliction that had become her "normal" — but

rather, it is Jesus who initiates the healing, and lays hands upon her. With his divine touch he restores her: in body, in spirit and into community.

Religious leaders and the crowds watch and witness as the bent over woman morphs from being shaped like a question mark,(?) into being shaped like an exclamation point! (!) They watch as she moves from the living the question “Where is God in all this?,” to living the answer, “Bless the Lord! Praise God!” With a touch, and a word from Jesus, this “Daughter of Abraham”, has been healed and restored, no longer exiled from community.

Such stories of miraculous healing and transformation may feel like fairy tales — things that happen only in the Bible or in fiction. Images of televangelists placing hands upon infirm people, boldly calling them to stand up and walk, and them doing so, may arouse the cynic in us. They may seem too good to be true - impossible to imagine. Yet it is Jesus, and his disciples in their testimonies, who remind us again and again, that all things are possible with God. But if we cannot dispel our disbelief — if such tales seem outside the realm of our lived experiences, perhaps we are to be cautioned not to take things so literally — but to hold such miracles tenderly as together we seek the deeper or hidden invitations found within them?

Although the watching crowd rejoiced at all the good things Jesus was doing, the synagogue leader, a man charged with the responsibility of upholding the laws and rituals of the faith, was confronted by what he saw. Struggling to make sense of it, his response was one of indignation, angry at what he perceived to be unacceptable behavior - behavior that countered what he understood the tenants of the faith to be — that on the Sabbath no act of work was to be done, and his assessment that healing could wait til tomorrow.

It isn't that he was wrong about the laws, or that he was out of order in reminding the people that the Sabbath called them to rest. It's that his attachment to those very laws and rules held him captive, unable to recognize Jesus' action for what it was — a holy and liberating act of God. It is into this moment that Jesus questions the rationale of putting off until tomorrow what can liberate today. It is as if he said, “if not today, when?” Here Jesus likens the afflicted woman to one's animals, released and led to water. Certainly as a beloved child of God she deserves as much consideration for relief as the animals. With his touch, and simple recognition of her as a daughter of Abraham, the woman realized that she is and always had been a child of God.

This encounter today, on the sabbath, with Jesus has transformed her posture of prayer and praise from one of burden and confinement into one of freedom and liberation. So on the one hand, Luke calls us to join with the crowd, and to suspend our disbelief, and to rejoice in the woman's healing and all that God does and can do. On the other, there is a deeper invitation before us. It is to ask ourselves: what is it that holds us captive, that causes us to be willing to say to one in need, Not today! That can wait until tomorrow...or some other day...or maybe never.?

In times when we feel confronted by change; when the rules and rituals or the ways of being we have subscribed to are challenged, our invitation is to pause to take note of the world around us. If we ask ourselves, where is God at work in this moment and how is God calling me to respond, we may become aware of liberation happening right before our eyes. We might see the new person walking tentatively through our doors, in need of welcome and encouragement. Instead of seeing the loudly babbling toddler as a disruption to Sunday services, we see them as fully expressed children of God. Instead of lamenting when a favorite prayer has been changed to one less familiar, we may hear God speaking to us in new ways.

And if we are blessed to witness another's liberation and freedom first hand — what if rather than analyze and assess, we simply praised God?.

If we fail to recognize God's presence in and around us at all times, even positive things like a woman being healed of her 18 year affliction can become distorted. It becomes too easy for us to craft ways to push back, to disallow others the fullness of their being. Like the synagogue leader, if we allow our obsession with rules and processes to take precedence over the human condition, we will lose perspective, and may soon find ourselves ashamed for our lack of compassion.

Jesus came to liberate. He came to make Holy and praiseworthy that which was broken. He came not only to restore the afflicted to wholeness, but to liberate each one of us from the ways of being that bind and oppress us — that keep us from being our best selves. Liberation is a profound gift of the Spirit that is yours and mine to claim. If not now, when?