

Traveling with Jesus sermon series

“While at the Synagogue”

[Luke 13:10-17](#)

In this season of vacations and road trips near and far, we are traveling with Jesus. We are reflecting on some of the places Jesus visited and the people he ministered to. On the first Sunday of this sermon series, we found Jesus and his disciples crossing over to the other side of Lake Galilee and ministering to the Gentiles, non-Jewish people. And last Sunday, we followed Jesus to Jericho, where he met Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, on a sycamore tree. Today, as we have just read, we catch Jesus as he is teaching in one of the synagogues.

Before going further, I invite you to take out the pew Bible near you, or open your favorite Bible app and turn to Luke, chapter 13, verse 10 in the New Testament. It will be helpful for you to follow along as we go.

Synagogue is a Greek word that literally means assembly or congregation; and in time, it came to refer to the place of assembly. For many years, synagogues played an important role in the life of the Israelites. They were local communal institutions where people gathered for religious, social, legal, and political activities. But, the main purpose of the synagogue was to provide a setting for regular worship.

Three times a year, Jewish people, would travel to Jerusalem to attend the festivals held at the Temple. But, they went to their local synagogue for day-to-day and week-to-week worship and prayer, and other faith formation activities. To be in a synagogue, especially on the Sabbath, a day of rest and worship, was one of the most fundamental spiritual disciplines of Judaism. People came together, but were separated by gender, age, and status, with men in the main area of the synagogue, and women and children, and slaves in the back.

By the time of Jesus, a synagogue was found in most towns of Galilee. So, it's no wonder that we often find Jesus teaching in a synagogue. In fact, in the Gospel of John, looking back on his ministry, Jesus said, “I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together.” (John 18:20)

Today's scripture reading opens with Jesus teaching in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath. And while he was teaching, a woman appeared. We are given a detailed description of her physical condition. Actually, there are 3 pieces of information about her: 1. She has been crippled for 18 years; 2. She is bent over; 3. She is quite unable to stand up straight. Perhaps we would diagnose her today as having a disease that had deteriorated her spine, causing her to bend over. With the detailed information about her physical condition, what Luke is trying to do is communicate to us the seriousness of her suffering.

This bent-over woman makes me think about my great-grandmother. She passed away when I was only a year old, so I do not have any direct memories of her. But, I fondly remember the stories my mother told me about her. I was her first great-grandchild, and she adored me. One of the ways she wanted to show her affection toward me was to carry me on her back. It was what she did for her son and all of her grandchildren when she was younger, and she wanted to do it for me, too. Unfortunately, her back was weak. Years of

hard labor had taken their toll. And by the time I was born, she was bent over so badly, that she could not carry me. However, this did not get in her way. She did not give up. She asked my mom to place me on her bent-over back and tie me to her body while she was bracing herself against the wall or on a table, so that even for a couple of minutes, she could carry me. My mom said that this would make my great-grandma so happy.

Going back to today's scripture reading, we see how Jesus notices the the bent over woman when she appears in the synagogue. Even though she is in the back of the room, unable to stand up straight, Jesus notices her and gives her the healing she needs. Like the thrice-detailed description of the infirmity of the woman, Luke tells us how Jesus healed her in three sequences: 1. He called her over; 2. He proclaimed her freedom from her ailment; 3. He laid hands upon her. Upon this last step, with Jesus laying hands upon her, she immediately stood up straight and began to praise God.

These actions of Jesus may not look or sound strange to our modern ears, but for the people of his time, the folks gathered at that synagogue, they would have caused quite a stir. First, Jesus was addressing a woman and speaking to her in the synagogue. In the first century, Jewish men were not supposed to speak to women in public. Perhaps you remember the story of the Samaritan woman found in the Gospel of John. The woman at the well was shocked when Jesus spoke to her. Her shock is because she knows a Jew is not to speak to a Samaritan. But later in the story, we hear how Jesus' disciples were astonished that he was speaking to a woman in public. Well, here we have Jesus again breaking with the social customs of his time and speaking to a woman, this time in the synagogue -- in front of the whole town!

Second, Jesus was calling the woman to the front of the synagogue. In their androcentric, patriarchal culture, the front of the synagogue was no place for a woman. Women were not supposed to stand in the front or take center stage, but stay in the back. But, here, we have Jesus, this unorthodox rabbi, not only addressing this woman but calling her to him at the front of the synagogue.

Third, Jesus was putting his hands on this woman. In his day, a Rabbi would never have touched a woman, let alone one suffering from spiritual infirmity as this one, in public because it would have violated the holiness code. So, can you imagine how shocked people must have been when Jesus addressed, called down, and then touched the bent-over woman? No wonder the leader of the synagogue was so upset!

Another thing we should not overlook is how the woman in this story does not ask Jesus to heal her. And no one makes such a request to Jesus on behalf of her, either. Over the years, she must have become accustomed to her physical condition. For 18 years, this unnamed woman became accustomed to straining to see the sky, the trees, and people's faces. For 18 long years, she became accustomed to looking down and seeing just the dirt and stones and people's feet. She must have given up any hope to be healed.

In Jesus' time, when someone was ill, people generally assumed that the person who was suffering must have done something to deserve it. People believed that evil spirits were the causes of physical abnormalities and mental illnesses. So, they tried to avoid persons who were sick or considered to be abnormal. To protect the righteous believers, the sick and abnormal were forced out to the edges of the community, and this social isolation was considered to be a godly response on the part of the community.

So, the bent-over woman's physical condition would have made her unwelcomed and invisible in the midst of her own spiritual home. She probably came to the synagogue every week, if not every day; and over time, people probably stopped taking notice of her, rendering her totally invisible.

But, not with Jesus! As soon as she entered the room, Jesus spotted her at a distance and noticed her condition immediately. And, he made her visible to others in the community again by addressing her, calling her to the front of the congregation, and healing her. The healing took place before anything else. He did not call a committee meeting to discuss the matter. He did not suggest to form a taskforce to engage the congregation in a theological debate on how he could heal her and keep the Sabbath holy at the same time. He just did it because he believe it was the right thing to do -- that releasing a woman from her suffering, even on the Sabbath, was holy and acceptable in the eyes of God.

Luke does not give us the details of how the woman responded to her miraculous healing. He simply reports that she praised God. But, we can imagine, can't we? Hallelujah! And you would think everyone in the room would have joined her in that chorus, singing Hallelujah and praises to God, amazed at the miracle that they have just witnessed with their own eyes. But not the leader of the synagogue. He was very angry that Jesus healed the woman on the Sabbath. So, he spoke up and kept saying to the crowd of people, "There are 6 days in which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

It's comedic if you picture it. This scene, where the leader of the synagogue is trying to maintain order and control -- the status quo -- in the midst of God's miraculous, healing act. But it's also tragic, because in some ways, how the leader of the synagogue responds is similar to how we all respond. He got angry because of what Jesus did. He had an issue with Jesus. But, instead of talking to him directly, he began speaking to others about it. Luke reports that he kept doing it. We all know this is not a healthy way to communicate, especially when there is a concern or conflict. Yet, this is us. It is what we do. When we are not happy with someone, instead of calling the person, we call someone else!

Brothers and Sisters, as we journey with Christ through the Gospel of Luke, we will see that God comes to us with a mission. Luke records Jesus was beginning his ministry by announcing that he has come to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18). As we have read today, Jesus does the very things he set out to do. He brings recovery and healing to those who are afflicted. He meets us in our bent-overness, in our hopelessness, in our invisibleness. And he restores our lives to the wholeness that God envisions for all of creation.

But, Jesus also comes to reveal our blindness, our weakness. He comes to show us the hypocrisy that we all engage in. And he does this not to condemn us but to set us free from the destructive behavior we are trapped in.

By the grace of God, we are healed and set free from all that binds us.
Thanks be to God!