

AH, TO BE FREE!

Luke 13:10-17

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

While I love to see these great Canadian Geese flying through the air honking as they go, it is a bit sad to see them taking up residence when they should be migrating. Some say it is the way we have caused them to become dependent on us and the food we throw them. Others say it has to do with changing climatic conditions. Whatever the reason, it is sad to see these great birds born to fly up and down the east coast announcing the changing seasons becoming content with living in a small pond where folks think of them as their Canadian Geese and throw them bread. Years ago I killed one with the car. It was early morning. The road was heavy with fog. The Goose came walking out of high grass on the right side of the road as he was going toward a small pond on the left side. When the moment was past I remember thinking, "What were you doing walking across the road when you were born for flying?" What a shame! Some of these creatures born to fly freely across great spans of the earth have become bound to a small plot of water and earth by their unnatural dependency upon humans who unknowingly help domesticate them.

It is always sad to see creatures being bound when they were created to be free. The scripture lesson tells us the stories of two people. In the beginning both are bound to a destructive way of life. At the end one has been set free while the other continues to live enslaved. The surprise of the story is that the suffering woman was set free while the apparently righteous leader of the synagogue remained enslaved. As we read the story we see that the woman came to the synagogue on that Sabbath expecting nothing like she received. As we get between the lines of the story, we see her coming in the room just as she had been doing for a long, long time and taking her place. The other women knew her. They were accustomed to her slow entrance and they made room for her just as they always did. About her the text says,

*...a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for
eighteen years. She was bent over and quite
unable to stand up straight.*

Everyone in that synagogue gathering knew her. They had become accustomed to her suffering. They had watched her as the infirmity continued to bend her toward the ground. And the woman herself had grown accustomed to her suffering as well. It was who she was. She never expected anything to be any different. Maybe she had felt differently in the beginning, but after eighteen years, a resignation settles in which takes away any hope of a better life.

Jesus wasted not a moment when He saw her. Verse 12 tells us what happened as she was making her way to her usual place in the house of worship.

*When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said,
"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."*

As He spoke He put hands upon her bent frame and
*Immediately she stood up straight and began
praising God.*

Why that woman probably started jumping and dancing and others probably got up from their seats and joined her. There was probably a big excited group hug as the women got up and circled around her. They must have looked like a bunch of baseball players as they huddle together jumping in the middle of the field when the winning run has been scored. An unplanned celebration and party erupted in that holy room. People on the outside might have accused them of being Pentecostal if there had been such a thing in those days.

A miracle of divine healing had taken place in their midst. Everyone was beside themselves. Everyone was happy. Everyone, that is, except the one who was in charge of worship that day. To him it seemed that things had gotten out of hand. The dignity, the decorum, the order which belonged to worship had been shattered. But, of even greater concern was the fact that Sabbath law had been broken while he was in charge. Verse 14 helps us hear the spirit of this upset and angry leader of the synagogue.

*But, the leader of the synagogue, indignant
because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept
saying to the crowd, "There are six days on
which work ought to be done; come on those
days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.*

Some things simply were not done on Sabbath. For example, it was forbidden to kindle a fire in the house or light a candle on the Sabbath. If either of those things were needed, a Gentile neighbor could, perhaps, help. It was also forbidden to throw hot water upon your face lest some fall to floor which might be construed to mean you were cleaning the floor. Other laws forbid eating an egg laid by a hen on the Sabbath, another made it unlawful to clap hands, another made it unlawful to climb a tree or to ride or to swim. Healing someone on the Sabbath was considered work which was more appropriately done the other six days. While the woman and her friends were dancing with joy, the leader of synagogue was wringing his hands at the terrible thing which had been done under his watch!

The leader of the synagogue was so bound by "what was supposed to be" that he was unable to see the suffering of a woman or the miraculous act of God which had taken place under his watch. He was held captive not to physical suffering but to a religious system which had become more important to him than human need. Handling human need was never meant to be a taboo on Sabbath, but he and others like him had made it so and were bound to such narrow legalistic thinking. When the story ends the woman who is a nobody is free and the leader of the synagogue who is a somebody is still in bondage. Jesus was there to set them both free of what kept them from fully living their lives but only the woman was able to accept what He was offering

Before we condemn this leader of the synagogue, a look inward might be an appropriate thing for us. We are all free. We are, after all, Americans. Yet, what we know as truth is that national freedom and personal freedom are two different things. Some of us are still remembering a hurt caused us which to this day remains unforgiven. It eats away at our insides every time we are caused to remember it. Some of are addicted to things we know we need to lay down. It may be something as obvious as alcohol or as private as pornography on the internet. Regardless of how many know about our addiction, we know and that is one to many. We know what addictions do. They demand time and energy and resources, they destroy our own sense of worth and wholeness, and they take us away from caring about ourselves and the relationships entrusted to us. Some of are bound by our fears. We are afraid of the future, we are afraid of what might be, we are afraid of invisible danger, we are just afraid. We understand the way fear limits our living, but we are deeply afraid to take a chance and see what might happen. And like the folks of the story, some of us are so bound by physical and cultural chains that we never really expect life to be any different than it is now. It is not that it is all that good now; we just have no expectations that it will ever be any different.

As we remember the way we are bound, we remember the Biblical story. We remember that Jesus in a room filled with human need is a prescription for wholeness. Like the woman we may not have come expecting anything significant to happen in terms of the things which limit are living. But, suppose for a moment that we take seriously the idea that Jesus is in this room and that He really does have the power and the desire to set us free from that one thing which is keeping us from living like we know He wants us to live and like we want to live. Suppose for a moment you could be set free of the guilt of some unconfessed sin. Suppose for a moment you could be set free of a desire for an adulterous relationship. Suppose for a moment you could live without a need for addictive drugs or addictive internet pornography. Suppose for a moment you could be set free of the fears which have kept life away for so long. Suppose for a moment Jesus could really set us free as He did the woman in the Biblical story. Would it not be worth asking Him for help? Would it not be worth risking a confession? Would it not make sense to give to Him what cannot be handled? Would it not be worth kneeling in His presence to ask for Him to touch your life with healing and transforming power? Or would it be better to stay as the leader of the synagogue? Would it be better to say, "Yes, Jesus is in this room, but I do not want Him messing with my life." Surely, such a choice is ours just as it was his. However, it is not a choice we have to make. We can choose to be free this very morning.

And so I invite you now to come to this altar. We were not born for brokenness, but wholeness. We were not born to be bound, but to live free. I invite you to come with the confidence that it is the meeting place. It is the place where our need intersects with the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. I invite you in His name to come and allow Him to touch You today and set you free. Come. Come now.

This sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Strickland at the Richmond Hill United Methodist Church in Richmond Hill, Georgia on August 26, 2007.