

If Not Today, When?
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The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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This story of a woman bent over, and then set free by Jesus to stand up, is easy to love. In fact, it may be just a tiny bit *too* easy to love.

I remember vividly the first time I heard this story, I was sitting in a circle of small wooden chairs in a Sunday School room, and a faithful woman told us this story, and I almost came out of my chair, and I couldn't wait to get the crafts and the snack and everything over with to get out of there, because every week there was a woman who sat in front of our family – like all churches, we all had *our* pews – there was a woman who sat in front of us week after week who was bent over, whose face I had never seen, because it was pointed down all the time, and I could not wait to go tell her that Jesus could make her stand up again.

Honestly, I don't remember what happened, whether some wise adult said, "you know, maybe this isn't the moment, maybe growing in your own theological understanding would be good," but I loved this story.

I think the story is also easy to love, though, because none of us, I suspect, has the option of leaving here today and, by speaking words of liberation and by touching someone, setting them immediately free from a debilitating and isolating illness.

I may be wrong. Some of you may be able to do that. But I suspect none of us really feels as if that's an option for us this afternoon.

And so, it's quite easy to imagine that if we *were* able to do that, no silly rule or policy or practice that says "not today" would dissuade us.

Please notice that the "antagonist" in this story, if you will, the leader of the synagogue, did not say, "That woman is not worth healing." He did not say, "Oh, it's not too bad to be stooped over! At least there's beautiful grass to look at!" He just said, "Not today."

And still, it's easy to distance ourselves from the indignant religious leader, smug in our own confidence, that *we* would act like Jesus.

Perhaps we need, then, to complicate the story just a little bit.

Luke is the only Gospel writer to include this story, and in Luke, Jesus's mission, or his purpose, is always clear, because early on in chapter 4, Jesus stands up and tells everyone who will listen, "My mission is to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to captives, and to let the oppressed free." To let people go free.

And it's just the same turn of phrase that Jesus uses when he says to the woman, "Go free of your ailment."

To liberate. Jesus is acting in his core mission, his purpose, and he is willing to break convention and to make some folks uncomfortable in order to do that.

When order keepers say, "Sure, free her, just not today," Jesus says, "If not today, then when?"

And so, I wonder about us. I wonder what our calling is, and our purpose.

I wonder what, collectively, as St. Mary's, what is *our* calling? Our purpose?

I wonder what my own calling and purpose is. I wonder what yours is. And I wonder how rules and policies and procedures of the world all around us, that the world we live and move and work and play and study in, say to us, "Not here, not today, not in this way. I mean, we know you're well-meaning, and we're for liberation, we're for flourishing, full people just like you are, but not like that."

I've been away for several weeks (number one, it's good to be back). During the last four weeks, I've spent a significant amount of time navigating institutions, and institutions that are formed and organized and exist for good, and people who are committed to doing good for others.

I've been deeply involved with medical institutions, and also brushed up against, in this last week, educational systems, social security systems, banking and financial systems, and retail establishments. Lots of them.

We've all together, in the last month, been navigating or inundated with political systems, haven't we? And what I have found is that when there's a rub, almost no one says, "No. You can't have what it is we all know would be for your good, or for justice, or right." Almost no one says that what you're asking for is unreasonable.

Instead they say things like, "Mm, your income is \$300 too high, you're two weeks too young or too old, you need different kinds of papers with you, this thing takes two weeks, and you can't do anything until you have that, so you've got to wait, your address isn't in our system, your blood pressure is too high or too low, your condition hasn't lasted long enough, we don't have enough personnel, or we just haven't read your documents quite yet."

I spent four weeks navigating systems like this, that are populated by people who desperately intend and want to do good for others. I spent these four weeks, and I'm an insider, right? I'm pretty good with the English language, I understand how things work, I'm an insider at almost every point, and yet, I walk away finding myself frustrated to the point of despair.

And at the end of the day, I can usually find a plan C or D or X to care for the ones I love most. And even this week, at a few points along the way, I've encountered someone who says, "If not today, if not here, if not me, if not in this way, how will it happen?" And so, they are courageous and bold and step outside the way it's normally done to do what is good for another.

I'm not going to tell you those stories, because we need to protect people who do them. But yes, people who say, "If not today, then when? If not here, then where? Where will justice happen, where will people be set free, where will those who've been looking at the bottom and exist near the bottom, when and where and how will they be able to stand up to their full stature and see this beautiful, glorious world, and participate in it fully?"

It's become more and more clear to me that whenever and wherever someone is liberated, they're liberated from something that is working very well for someone else.

Whenever someone is able to stand to their full stature for the first time, they are taking space that someone else was enjoying.

And so, I wonder for those who are unsheltered in our city, stooped by politics, by rules, by zones, by procedures. I wonder for children without a ride to school who are held by hiring practices and risk management and I can't even figure out what else. I wonder for persons at our Southern border who are caught by a maze of rules and both covert and overt hatred. I wonder for LGBTQ persons who fear, realistically, about politics used against them. I wonder for immigrants, even legal immigrants, who are enmeshed in a web of agencies that is astonishingly difficult to get through. I wonder for women watching as their agency is diminished.

I wonder who and when someone will say, "If not today, then when? If not me, then who? If not, in this way, as far from perfect as it may be, how? How will they be set free?"

We know that God's will for people, for creation, for all of us, is wholeness and flourishing life, and freedom, and life in community. We know this.

And I wonder who we are willing to inconvenience or offend in order to make this flourishing, liberating love known to people around us. I wonder when the day will be when we say, "If not today, then when?"

You can tell me why and how I'm doing something wrong, but all I know is, for those who are stooped over and cannot stand, tomorrow doesn't sound that promising either. Today does, though.

We didn't read this morning all the way to the end of the story, actually. The people who decide these things had us stop. The story goes on a little bit. We read to all the people who saw what Jesus did for this woman were rejoicing. (I wonder if "all" includes the curmudgeon, but I think so. I like to think so.)

But all were rejoicing, and then Jesus says, "And so, what do you think the realm of God is like?"

I mean, it follows just after this, and he goes on to say, "I'll tell you what the kingdom of God is like. It's like leaven in bread. It's like a mustard seed that grows into a bush and provides haven for others."

I think Jesus sees that people would think, what's the big deal with one woman liberated? One woman made well? One woman who's able now to live fully? And he says, "I'll tell you what, one woman living fully in community rejoicing with her, that's what the realm of God is like."

So, week after week, day after day, for all these generations when we have prayed, "your kingdom come, your will be done," this is what we pray for. We pray for ourselves for strength and courage. To be willing to upset what is working – sometimes for us, and most certainly for others – we are praying for courage to say, "today we will act on behalf of others."

We are praying for each other, for the moments we encounter, when we do have the ability to speak, to stand with and stand for another.

This is what we pray for, over and over. It changes the world. It transforms what we know. And so, let it, then, be what we act for, what we live, and what we live for.

To the God who chooses this day, over and over, to come to us, to this God be honor and glory today, and indeed forever more.

Amen.

Psalm 71:1-6

In you, O Lord, have I taken refuge; *
let me never be ashamed.

In your righteousness, deliver me and set me free; *
incline your ear to me and save me.

Be my strong rock, a castle to keep me safe; *
you are my crag and my stronghold.

Deliver me, my God, from the hand of the wicked, *
from the clutches of the evildoer and the oppressor.

For you are my hope, O Lord God, *
my confidence since I was young.

I have been sustained by you ever since I was born;
from my mother's womb you have been my strength; *
my praise shall be always of you.

Jeremiah 1:4-10

The word of the Lord came to me saying,

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord said to me,

"Do not say, 'I am only a boy';
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,

says the Lord."

Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me,

"Now I have put my words in your mouth.
See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant."

Luke 13:10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.