

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost, Year C  
Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6;  
Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

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“Jesus said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’”<sup>1</sup>

We didn’t actually hear these words from the Gospel of Luke this morning – though if you’re following along in your Bibles, you’ll see this is the question Jesus poses directly following the passage we just heard. We’ll get to this in a moment, this question Jesus asks that helps us grasp what Jesus has shown us in this story today of the healed woman.

At a glance, this seems like a simple story: before Jesus in the synagogue is a woman, crippled and in debilitating pain for eighteen years – a number that might refer to the bondage of God’s people in Israel years before at the hands of the Moabites.<sup>2</sup> That Jesus *heals* the woman should come to no surprise, and even that he does so on the Sabbath does not seem all that noteworthy to our ears. Here is Jesus, the Son of God, engaging in holy work on the holy day – when else would be better?

So the protestations of the synagogue leader seem a bit odd, as if the issue is with Jesus more than his actions. And, in a sense, that’s exactly right: though this unnamed, healed woman is important to the story, the author of Luke’s gospel is really trying to point out something important about Jesus. This story is about the core of Jesus’ life and ministry.

Though Jesus has many important moments in synagogues throughout his earthly journey, let us turn back to one of the first, the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. In the fourth chapter of Luke, Jesus has just endured his encounter with the temptations of Satan, and returns to his hometown of Nazareth to teach at the synagogue there. On this particular sabbath day, he stands and reads from a portion of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>3</sup>

Given this context, should anyone have been surprised by Jesus’ actions in today’s passage? His first public action is to proclaim God’s purpose in the person of Jesus Christ in the world, and to announce it on the day of the sabbath: Jesus is here to bring good news to the poor, release the captives, recover

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:18 NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Judges 3:14.

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 61:1-2.

the sight of the blind, and let the oppressed go free. All this is done in the name of proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor, the Jewish practice of the Jubilee, where debts are forgiven and God's mercy is proclaimed, in what is essentially a year of sabbath.<sup>4</sup> All today's story does is to illustrate exactly what Jesus has told us his ministry will look like all along.

Jesus' response to the protestations is anything but random, too. We hear, in the institution of the sabbath, in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy: "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you."<sup>5</sup>

So when Jesus speaks about oxen and donkeys, this isn't some stray illustration: he's directly quoting from the source, the essence of the sabbath, that neither you nor your ox or your donkey shall do any work.

What is Jesus saying here? We could imagine that Jesus is suggesting a loophole, an exception to the sabbath law. But I don't think so. Of all the illustrations of work Jesus could have used, Jesus says this: "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?"<sup>6</sup> In a technical sense, this is work. But what Jesus is saying is really, "Even on the sabbath, do you not take your ox or your donkey and provide them with *life*?" Water, the substance we need to sustain our lives, water, that refreshes us, renews us, restores us in baptism as we die to sin and are reborn in Jesus Christ – Jesus is not telling us what work does and does not violate the sabbath, Jesus is teaching us to hold the sabbath holy, and embrace life.

And that brings us back to the verse I quoted in opening this sermon: "Jesus said therefore, 'What is the kingdom of God like?'"

Jesus continues:

"What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches."<sup>7</sup>

From a mere moment in time, in a small, dusty village long ago and far away, a simple man stood up in the local synagogue and promised nothing short of life and redemption to the people who need it most.

What is the kingdom of God like? God's embracing arms open wide enough to bring good news to the poor: those who went to bed hungry last night, and those who have much yet are spiritually impoverished. Wide enough to release the captives, those who are imprisoned and those who are captive to the world and its greed. Wide enough to restore sight to the blind, those with physical

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<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 25:8–13.

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 5:12-14.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 13:15b.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 13:18-19.

ailments and those who cannot see God at work today in our midst. Wide enough to let the oppressed go free from all that ails us. Wide enough for you, and for me.

Where do you witness the kingdom of God in your lives? Jesus calls us today into a lifegiving ministry, one that does not violate God's commandments, but rather embraces God's desire to live in relationship with each of us, so that we might have eternal life in God.

Our duty, our call, then, is to seek out those moments when we can be lifegiving to those around us. We rarely have an opportunity as obvious as Jesus' encounter with the woman in the synagogue. But each day, we are faced with opportunities to, in ways small and large, proclaim God's favor, offer lifegiving water, and be the branches in which birds of the air make their nests. We have the chance to serve God's people just as Jesus does.

Amid all our flaws, all our failings, the kingdom of God looks like us: each of us, all of humanity, made in God's image. This is our holy work, today and every day, to bear witness to God's kingdom within us, here in our world, to all those we may encounter. *Amen.*