

August 25, 2019

Luke 13: 10-17

Prayer: O Holy God, we welcome you into our worship service today. We take seriously your promise to be among us when we come together in your name. We pray in the name you wore when you walked among us, Amen.

The Kingdom of God is Like ...

One of my clergy friends once took a job as chaplain in a retirement home in Easley. She had their book club read *The Weight of Mercy*, and then invited me in to speak.

At some point during the discussion, someone said what someone usually says, “I think if Jesus came back today, he’d worship at Triune.”

I just kind of nodded, thinking, “Yes, I would be a fine pastor for Jesus.”

But then another woman screamed out, “Oh, no, he would not!”

And she gave a 10-minute monologue on why Jesus would *never* come here. Why he’d *never* come to a place where people cursed at the staff or stole canned goods to sell for crack or spit on the pastor – all of which happened in the book. She was horrified at the thought.

I think the idea offended her lifelong connection to good churches where people sincerely sacrificed and cared about each other. She saw Triune, I imagine, as a little too loose where the holy is concerned.

Now I might not agree with her, but that’s a valid opinion. I’m happy to say the group heard her out.

This is, by the way, not a new argument. Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Luke 13: 10-17**.

Now (Jesus) was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 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.

12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

14 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.'

15 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? 16 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?'

17 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.

If ever there was a passage in which our 21st century smugness comes through, it is this one. We sneer at the leader of the synagogue as outdated, outmaneuvered, outclassed.

We pat ourselves on the back and tell each other, *We'd never do that! We'd never put the Sabbath before the healing of a woman! Jesus would be so much happier with us than he was with those religious leaders.*

Well, yeah. Because we don't keep the Sabbath. We do not work for six days and then keep the Sabbath holy as the fourth commandment tells us to. We don't even keep the Lord's Day, which pretty much replaced the Sabbath for Christians.

Doctors and nurses are working at the hospital today. The malls are open. Crews are working at the newspapers and television and radio stations. Restaurants and convenience stores and hotels and movies are open.

So if you live in a society – as we do – that completely ignores the Sabbath, it's pretty easy to side with Jesus.

It's pretty easy to pull ourselves up self-righteously and point out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees: Because what they were trying so hard to protect *makes no sense to us*. It's not part of our lives.

We'd take that crippled woman to the emergency room so fast her head would spin. Why wouldn't it be open on a Sunday?

Clearly, this reading of the text is bad Sunday school theology appropriate for no one over the age of 5. It ignores the radical nature of what was happening in the life of Jesus and in the society around him.

For if you look at the 13th chapter of Luke as a whole, this one passage becomes part of a larger picture – a picture of the in-breaking kingdom of God.

In this chapter, Jesus is in the crosshairs of the cross. He and the disciples are headed to Jerusalem, where he will be executed.

As they travel, he preaches repentance that will lead to inclusion in the kingdom of God. And he is preaching about what that kingdom will look like.

Today's passage is sandwiched between spoken kingdom parables.

Just before it, Jesus tells the parable of the barren fig tree. A man planted a fig tree, but it bore no fruit. So he told his gardener: "Cut it down!"

But the gardener urged patience. The gardener urged a second chance. The gardener told the tree's owner, "**Let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.**" (Luke 13: 8-9)

This is a picture of grace. This is a picture of God's mercy in waiting upon us to allow us every chance to enter his kingdom.

Immediately after the passage of Jesus healing the crippled woman are those famous short parables on the mustard seed and the yeast.

First, Jesus says the kingdom of God 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.**" (Luke 13: 19)

Second, the kingdom of god is "**like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.**" (Luke 13: 21)

In other words, the kingdom of God can look quite ordinary. It can look like the smallest of all seeds. It can look like the unimpressive powder that is yeast.

But look what those things do. A mustard seed grows into a great tree that can provide sanctuary, a home, to birds. Yeast can make inedible flour into dough that becomes life-sustaining bread.

Both these things – nearly invisible to the naked eye, certainly unimposing – can become great things, protective things, nourishing things.

So it is with is the kingdom of God.

We think of parables as stories and sayings of Jesus, and that is correct. But sometimes, sometimes, the gospel writers present us with action sequences that become almost like Jesus *acting out* a parable.

Kind of like Jesus starring in Playback Café.

I think that is what Luke is doing with this story of the crippled woman.

Right in the middle of these three spoken parables about a kingdom of God that looks like a second chance at producing fruit ... that looks like home... that looks like food, Luke places this action sequence.

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He sees a woman who has been crippled for 18 years. She does not ask him for healing. Jesus sees her and takes the initiative.

“... (H)e called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’ ”

And bam! So she is.

The kingdom of God is like ... a woman who has been crippled for 18 years, and is suddenly healed.

But this parable wasn't spoken. It was lived. It was acted out.

We at Triune are big believers in partnerships. Jasmine Road and Bon Secours St. Francis have offices in our building. Our front-line staff meets weekly with the staffs of other homeless service providers. At our Wednesday morning food pantry, you'll find other helping agencies.

One of our newest partners represented on Wednesday mornings is FAVOR, Faces and Voices of Recovery. FAVOR is an agency that is laser-focused on recovery. Whereas most of us who help with addiction wait for someone to come to us for help, FAVOR is turning the model of substance abuse recovery on its head.

Director Rich Jones says – quite rightly – that 90 percent of the people in addiction are NOT seeking help. So FAVOR goes after them – in emergency rooms, in encampments, at Triune on Wednesday mornings. Because we don't always know when we need healing.

Like the crippled woman who didn't ask for Jesus's help, *we don't always know when we need healing.*

On Monday morning, I got to work a little before 9. I was still juggling my purse and briefcase and looking to see if any coffee was left over from breakfast.

A man I'd never seen came up to the water cooler and demanded to know if there was coffee. "I don't think so," I said. "We served breakfast at 7 and it looks like they drank it all."

He said, "Nobody told me that." And he threw his cup into the trash, yelled "This place sucks" and slammed out the door.

Now people get mad at me all the time. But it usually takes more than five seconds.

We don't always know when we need healing.

Not everyone came to Jesus for healing either. Sometimes grace looked like him calling out to a stooped and crippled woman.

Sometimes grace looks like Jesus calling out to us.

That's why I refer to this lived out parable as the in-breaking of the kingdom of God. It is one of those times when we catch a glimpse of this kingdom that Jesus talked so much about.

This woman got a glimpse of the kingdom that day.

But our story is not over.

Because not everyone will welcome that kingdom. They never do.

In this case, it was the religious leaders who had so much to lose if Jesus was indeed God. Like my heckler at the retirement home, they could not imagine God coming in and breaking his own Sabbath.

This is perfectly understandable. These men had spent their lives studying God's Scriptures, guarding the interpretation of God's Scriptures. Moses gave them 10 Commandments, which they kept so adamantly that they enacted another 613 laws as a hedge. Another 613 laws to ensure they didn't come close to breaking one of the 10.

And here comes Jesus, breaking the law about the Sabbath. They couldn't imagine God doing such a thing.

What could we *not* imagine God doing?

The woman in the retirement home couldn't imagine God worshiping with the likes of us.

Other people would be horrified if God came to earth right now ... and socialized with gays.

If God came to earth right now ... and ate with illegal immigrants.

If God came to earth right now and raised from the dead ... a pornographer.

Many Christians would scream, "No fair!" Because they have staked everything they know, everything they follow, everything they revere to certain beliefs.

That's all in the world this synagogue leader was doing. He could not imagine God coming to earth and breaking his own commandment about the Sabbath.

And yet that is exactly what Jesus did.

And when the synagogue leader called him on it, Jesus called him and his friends "hypocrites."

You can't tell it so much in our translation, but he used the Greek word for "bound" or "tether" to talk about how they *unbound* their animals on the Sabbath to drink. But they objected to the *unbinding* of this woman whom Satan had *bound* for 18 years.

When we read this story 2,000 years later, we're mostly saying, "You go, Jesus!" We rejoice along with the crowds at this healing. We jeer at Jesus' opponents who were put to shame.

But I don't think it would be like that if Jesus were here today. I think we'd be trying to protect our status quo, too. I think we'd be trying to force him to conform not so much to Scripture, but to our long-held interpretation of Scripture.

And that would be a mistake, because history shows that when God comes to earth, he turns our beliefs upside down.

I think we need to be careful about boxing God in, about telling God – or each other – what God will and will not do, what God can and cannot do.

For if the sovereignty of God is supreme, it means that neither that retired lady in Easley nor I can set God's boundaries.

Meanwhile, that is why the church needs to be the kind of place Jesus could use in a parable.

The kingdom of God is like ... a church that welcomes people with AIDS and staph infections.

The kingdom of God is like ... a church that welcomes immigrants and gang members and news reporters and homosexuals and teachers and prostitutes and drug addicts and businesspeople and the mentally ill and lawyers and alcoholics and sex offenders and rich people who hoard their wealth and ex-prisoners and tax evaders and ... retired ladies who don't want to be around any of them.

The kingdom of God is like ... a church that follows these four parables of Luke in chapter 13.

Like the patient gardener, it offers mercy.

Like the mustard seed, it offers sanctuary.

Like the yeast, it offers nourishment.

And like the woman suddenly standing straight after 18 years, it offers healing.

We *should* recognize that the synagogue leader who opposed her healing on the Sabbath was, in some sense, hypocritical.

But we miss the point if we do not recognize that same hypocrisy in ourselves.

Amen.