

Christ the Healer
Luke 13:10–17
Sunday, August 21, 2022

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, help us to hear your voice and see your face, that we might find the healing we need. Amen.

Whenever I have heard this story of Jesus healing the woman crippled for 18 years on the sabbath, I have always heard this as a story *about* sabbath. About our *need* for sabbath, and how God gives us one day of the week where we are called to rest so that we might find the healing that we need. Sabbath is a major theme all throughout scripture, and it's something that I always try to preach on at least once a year, because I think that it is especially important in our culture – a culture where we define people's worth by what they *do* or *produce* – to remember that we are not slaves whose value is determined by work. Our value and worth are based on the fact that we are children of God created in the image of God, and if God could take a day off to rest and the universe did not fall apart, then maybe we can, too. Sabbath helps us order our lives, not according to the rhythms of the *world* or of *man*, but of *God*. It reminds us *who* we are and *whose* we are. So when I saw several months ago that this was the lectionary text for today, I thought, "Perfect. We'll talk about sabbath right before I go on vacation, right before Labor Day. There will be some natural tie ins there. This will be *easy*."

Then I *read* this story. I mean *really* read it, took my time with each sentence, each *word*, asking, "What is God saying to *us*, *today*, in *this*?" Usually when I read this, the crippled woman is just incidental to the story. The focus is on *sabbath* and Jesus' interaction with the leader of the synagogue, and the healing of this woman is just a way for us to get to *that*. But I realized that is no different than what Jesus criticizes in this religious leader. He was not focused on the *woman* – on her pain and her needs – he was focused on the *sabbath*, on maintaining a *tradition*.

But this time, when I read this, my attention was drawn to this woman. This woman who, for 18 years, was so bent over that she could not stand up straight.

A few years ago, I woke up one morning, and I could not stand up straight. A muscle in my lower back had seized up and was spasming, and it was so tight that I was literally walking around doubled over. If I tried to stand up straight, it would send sharp, shooting pain throughout my body. I went to the doctor, and he sent me for an x-ray. The x-ray didn't show any problems with my *bones*, so they figured it had to be *muscular*, and gave me a muscle relaxer. The muscle relaxer didn't even *touch* the pain. So I went to a chiropractor. He identified the problem pretty quickly, but in order to *fix* it, one of the things he had to do was put me on this table that turned me upside down and hung me by my feet. Which straightened out my back and caused it to spasm, shooting pain all throughout my body. Then he had to take this little piston gun that pounded the muscle up and down my back. Eventually, the muscle released, and the pain *started* to go away. But it took about a week. A *week* of some of the worst pain I have ever experienced. *I can't imagine 18 years of it.*

I was so *desperate* for relief from that pain. I can't imagine how desperate *she* was after 18 years. Or how *hopeless* she was. If you notice here, she doesn't initiate this interaction with Jesus. She doesn't go to him asking for healing or help. There are all these other stories of people crying out to Jesus for healing. But all Luke says is that she was *there*. "Just then there appeared a woman..." We're not even told that she went there *looking* for Jesus. She just showed up at the synagogue, going to worship, resigned to her suffering.

But Jesus *saw* her. *He* called *her* over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." *He* laid his hands on *her*. Not like the woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for

twelve years, who sneaks up and tries to touch Jesus' cloak, thinking *that* will heal her. Not like Jairus whose daughter was sick, and *he asked* Jesus to come lay his hands on her, that she might be made well. Completely unprompted and unsolicited, Jesus *sees* her and *reaches out* to her and *heals* her.

And what it makes me wonder is where that woman is among us. Who among us is *suffering* and in need of *healing*, and we don't even *see* them? Or we're waiting for *them* to come to *us* and ask for help. If someone walked into the sanctuary right now and said, "I need help," would we say, "Can you wait 20 more minutes?" I don't know that you would. I know a lot of you who I think would leave worship and go see how you can help them. And that's one of the things that I love about you all. But there are a lot of churches where that wouldn't be the case. I've been in some of them before. And if I'm being honest, *I* might actually say, "Can I finish the sermon first?"

When the leader of the synagogue sees Jesus healing this woman, he says, "No, no, no! That's not what we're here to do today! This is the *sabbath*. This is a day of *rest*. We are only here to *worship God*, and healing is *work*." He was so focused on maintaining the *tradition* of the sabbath and the *institution* of the synagogue that he did not make space for the healing power of Jesus. Churches can get caught in that same mindset. We can become so focused on maintaining our *tradition* and the *institution* of the church that we do not make space for the healing power of Jesus Christ.

As I read this story today, I don't think it's just about sabbath. I think that God is asking us to think about a bigger question in this story. What is the church for? Why are we here? Why do

we exist? Are we just here to maintain a tradition or an institution? Or are we here to help people experience Christ's healing, liberating presence and love?

As a *country* and as a *people* – as the human race – we are not well. We experience every day a level of fighting and anger and violence and lies and loneliness and sickness and death that is just *crippling* us. Our world is in such desperate need of *healing*, and where will they go for it? Not to *us*. If we're being brutally honest, the world does not look to the church to find healing anymore. So many people look at the church and see the same level of fighting and anger and violence and lies and selfishness that they see in the rest of the world. I once heard a pastor say about the church, "We say that we're a hospital, but when people get inside, they discover that we are actually a courthouse." We say that we're here for *healing*, but people look at us and experience *judgment*.

When I had back problems, I didn't go to the church for healing. I went to a doctor and a chiropractor. Now you might say, "Well, of course you did. If someone is sick, they should obviously go to a medical professional instead of just going to a church." But what if someone is grieving? Or struggling with addiction? Or poverty? Or hunger? Or depression, loneliness? Or a broken relationship? There are any number of support groups and therapists and AA meetings and community action programs and medications available to help them. Why go to a church when you can find healing elsewhere? What do *we* have to offer that they *don't*? You might say *community*. But people *do* find community any number of other places. Schools, sports, bars, book clubs, senior centers, service organizations, hobby groups. What makes us any different than them?

This past week, Ridgley sent me something that she came across on Facebook. It was a list that a pastor had put together of the reasons why they do what they do for a living; reasons why people should consider being part of a church:

1. To join a church is to commit to a social circle you do not get to choose and can therefore show you whether your spirituality is authentic or not.
2. Joining a church is a way of practicing – among a small group of people over a significant period of time – what you'd like the world to be like.
3. To join a church is to live in rebellion against the forces which are brainwashing you into making your consumer desire the center of the world, reducing all your experiences of the world (including all the people in it) to instruments and resources.
4. Joining a church is to organize your life around a time to confess your limitations, culpability, and imperfections together with other people, so that you can get used to receiving divine forgiveness and hope in response to your honesty.
5. To join a church is to resist all traditional loyalties to state, party, culture, family, or affinity in an act of loyalty to a group that transcends all natural categories
6. Joining a church organizes your financial priorities around supporting an inclusive community for vulnerable people...that you actually have to live with.
7. To join a church is to cultivate an environment unlike your home, work, or play where your life is not measured according to any other purpose or goal than to discover and enjoy your own humanity.
8. Joining a church is a way of maintaining healthy skepticism about human knowledge and capacities in the language of divine mystery.
9. To join a church is to cultivate an imagination for how your unique talents and creative potential can be offered on purpose for love instead of money.
10. Joining a church is a life lesson in how to deal with difficult people without retaliating, dehumanizing, or running away (in the desperate hope of not *becoming* a difficult person).

There is *truth* in that list. But do you think that list would make *anybody* want to join a church?

“Oh, I can organize my life around a time to confess my limitations, culpability, and imperfections together with other people, so that I can get used to receiving divine forgiveness and hope in response to my honesty? Sign me up!” If someone came to me and asked, “Why should I join your church,” I would *not* say, “To organize your financial priorities around supporting an inclusive community for vulnerable people that you actually have to live with.” If you're looking for reasons to be part of a church, if I'm looking for reasons why I do what I do for a living, this is not exactly a *compelling* list.

You know what's *missing* from it? Any mention of Jesus Christ. All of this is stuff you can find elsewhere, either in other groups or in videos online, or you can just read it in books. What makes us *different*? Jesus Christ. Why are we here? Jesus Christ. What do we have to offer the world? Jesus Christ. Not a *theology* or a *tradition* or an *institution*, but a *person*. *He* is at the heart of our faith and our life together. And not just a great man or teacher who lived 2,000 years ago, but the resurrected God who came in human flesh and lives and reigns over heaven and earth today. The God who promises us that *we* can experience resurrection, too, both in *this* life and in the life to come. Not an ideology or an *-ism*, and not just other people, but the *person* of Jesus Christ whose image we bear. We are here *for him*, and he is *in our midst* right now. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am *there with them*."

Why should you be part of a church? To know Jesus Christ. Not to know *about* him, but to *know* him, personally and intimately. To know the God who created us and gave us life, so that we can know why we are here and what that life is about. To learn how to *talk* to that God and *listen* to that God and discern that God's purpose and will for our lives and for the world in which we live. To experience Christ's presence with us today and love for us always. To know that we are forgiven and loved by the creator of existence and to learn how to share that love and forgiveness with others. To know the love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and generosity and faithfulness and gentleness and self-control that are in Christ and to live in ways that make them known to the world.

An *ideology* is not going to heal this broken world; we have enough of those already, and they only prove to be divisive. An *institution* is not going to heal this broken world. Only Jesus Christ is able to heal this broken world. And I know that, not because I have *heard* about it or read it in a book. I know it because I have *experienced* it. I have experienced Christ's healing

touch in my life. I have heard his liberating voice. When I was doubled over under the weight of anxiety and fear, Jesus came to me with healing in his hands and set me free. And he can do the same for you, for *us*.

I know that Jesus can heal this broken world because I know *Jesus*. Not the *idea* of Jesus, but the *person* of Jesus. He was the *source* of all of this, before the foundations of the world, and he is the one who is gathering all things unto himself, the one to whom all things and people will return. The Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. Christ is the great physician who comes to us with healing in his hands. Whatever is crippling us, whatever is weighing us down so that we cannot stand up straight, Jesus can set us free.

Will *we* make space *here*, in this church, in our lives, for the healing power of Jesus Christ? We need to be a place where all people can experience the healing, liberating presence and love of Jesus. *That* is why we are here. To be a place where people can *meet* Jesus and *know* Jesus and *talk* to Jesus and *listen* to Jesus and be *healed* by Jesus. The *only* reason we are here is Jesus. If not for Jesus, we are just another social club or service organization. But *with* Jesus, we can share God's healing, liberating love with the world, and we can rejoice together at all the wonderful things that Jesus does, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.