

Freeing The Captive (Especially On The Sabbath) – Judy Cox

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-21

We love these parables, don't we?! What's not to love?—gardening in the great outdoors, the smell of freshly baked bread, mmm... Sometimes we actually miss their point because they're so very familiar to us, or we don't understand their original setting. In the last, for example, when we hear "yeast," and think of that freshly baked bread, we too easily affirm the unsettling disruptions of God's Kingdom as something comfortable. But to Jesus' audience, yeast was a symbol of the nasty and contagious, the "unclean." How about this as a current-day parallel? The Kingdom of God is like cancer! It spreads aggressively, and takes over, often in spite of medical efforts; we certainly view it as negative, and pray weekly for cancer survivors and sufferers. So that image hits hard—pretty unexpected, and even creepy! THAT'S the way Jesus' audience would have heard not just one but both of these parables.

That insignificant mustard seed is planted in a garden—no big deal, we think. But to them, such a planting is a huge deal, shocking and indecent. The Pharisees oh so carefully held to the laws of diverse kinds, from the Mishnah, which specifically prohibited the planting of mustard seed in a garden! There rules lay out the details of how to apply that part of the Holiness Code found in Leviticus 19:19. They brought order into the disorder of the world. Though it seems bizarre to us, distinguishing where things could or couldn't be planted, and what could be mixed together, maintained the boundaries of religious purity for God's people. There is a PROPER order for a garden, and that order maintains daily purity. Doesn't Jesus know this mustard nonsense is NOT it? In likening God's Kingdom to this messed-up garden, he speaks outrageously to those hearers.

Jesus also shows this weed growing riotously, out of control, disrupting and taking over the garden. With an incredibly funny and unexpected twist, this weed that you can't get rid of grows into the Old Testament image of the great end-times tree providing shelter for the nations—NOT the proper respect at all! The Kingdom Jesus proclaims breaks purity standards and disrupts this "proper" order of the world.

Luke puts these parables Jesus tells about the Kingdom immediately after a publicly criticized Sabbath healing. Here Jesus has acted out this same shocking, outrageous Kingdom. The setting is a synagogue, a place of worship, on the Sabbath. Jesus interrupts his teaching at the sight of a crippled woman. She doesn't seek his attention or ask for healing, nor do her friends—no mention is made of anyone's faith. Jesus simply sees her, knows her need and acts to rescue her.

Earlier, in the first five verses of this chapter, Jesus has already debunked the current thought that suffering is deserved punishment for sin. The protesting synagogue leader likely assumes her illness is punishment. (We call that blaming the victim.) Jesus calls her condition cruel, undeserved bondage. It's cruel physically, socially and religiously. Paralyzed in a bent posture, she hasn't been able to stand straight for a very long time. Was it osteoporosis? We don't know that, but do know crippling for whatever reason also attached some "uncleanness" to the sufferer, because being crippled disqualified males of the priestly line from priestly service. Also, simply as a woman she would have been dismissed to a lower social status. Her present is bleak and her future uncertain. For Jesus to speak to

her publicly, let alone to touch her, offends against “proper” behavior. Yet he sees her, interrupts his teaching to speak to her, and touches her. Using the rare *daughter of Abraham*, not just the more common *woman*, he honors her. With his touch he breaks the power of evil, setting this captive free. Instead of rejoicing, the synagogue leader protests loudly and immediately an “insult added to injury” in this breaking of the Sabbath.

As our Luke text implies, the Sabbath day of rest required “not-work”. Per Exodus 20 this fourth commandment in the Decalogue (or Ten Commandments) connected to keeping the proper order of creation, following God’s actions and ceasing-from-action at the beginning of the world. Why does Jesus critique this particular understanding as inadequate, and missing the main point? The Torah scriptures include another take on the Decalogue too! Let’s step aside to today’s Old Testament reading for a moment, to consider.

The last two verses of this Isaiah text may seem unfamiliar compared to the first half, through verse 12, which yearly shows up as an Ash Wednesday Old Testament reading option. Old Testament professor W. Eugene March convincingly argues against separating these halves, based on literary structure as well as content. Observance of Sabbath links not just closely, but inseparably, to turning from oppression to doing justice by caring for the needy! Why? Again, we might miss it. There’s much more to Sabbath than remembering God’s resting on the seventh day of creation.

According to the Deuteronomy 5 presentation of the Decalogue, the Sabbath day of rest was given for all in the community—those at the bottom as well as the top of the social structure, even including any slaves, animals and resident aliens. This observance was to be a weekly reminder and remembrance to and for all of God’s deliverance of Israel from captivity. Older translations underscore the wording we notice in the NRSV of Luke today: *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage ... remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.* (Deut. 5: 6, 15; NKJV)

Do you see the irony? Sabbath’s deep connection to God’s deliverance of Israel from bondage is ignored; Jesus’ deliverance of this woman from bondage specifically on the Sabbath is opposed! Jesus exposes, as the oppression it is, the hypocritical readiness to “free” animals on the Sabbath (which the Mishnah allowed) while begrudging this sufferer her freedom from captivity. As emeritus professor Charles Raynal explains: “The Pharisees control the Sabbath with their work of cumbersome requirements that imprison or enslave people with longstanding bondage. A religious observance that is to remember and honor the liberation of God’s people thus becomes in the hands of the Pharisees a means of social control and oppression.”

Jesus’ wording about her being set free from long years of bondage doesn’t just correct their theology and practices; echoing unmistakable language of the Old Testament, it proclaims his identity. From the Torah through the Prophets, God self-identifies as the One Who has acted decisively to bring Israel *out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.* (NKJV) This God has always stood, above all else, for the poor, the oppressed and the captive. In the person of Jesus this God is revealed and present, standing for this woman. He sets her free from all the systems and powers that hold her captive. And of all people it’s the synagogue leader who doesn’t get it, doesn’t recognize God at work.

Notice that Jesus both dignifies and signifies this suffering woman. He dignifies her by seeing her, by touching and healing this one held captive by her condition; he signifies her not simply as *woman*, but by naming her an honored *daughter of Abraham*.

So what about us here, today? We too stand in this synagogue. The cancer of the Kingdom is invading, taking over. Thanks be to God, even when it might not make us feel comfortable! The mustard weed of the gospel is running riot, disrupting the order of the world, setting free the captive, sheltering the one beaten down. Do we feel unseen, dishonored, oppressed, misunderstood, crippled or held captive? Perhaps we need to know most of all today that Jesus sees us, in our captivity and paralysis, whether our crippling is due to physical pain, or fear, or exclusion, or abuse, or misunderstanding. His touch heals and frees us in our need, out of Who he is and has always been, not because of any feeble faith or lack of faith we have. Jesus speaks to us today, and he names us, "Daughter, son."

When this Kingdom triumphs, are we annoyed opponents, or rejoicing at Jesus' liberating acts? Do we find ourselves with the synagogue leader, protesting when our own misunderstanding of God's "proper order" is corrected? Will we open our eyes to the light of the gospel? In that light we see that WE can misunderstand, and can miss God present, acting now. Jesus offers us freedom too—freedom to confess where we are wrong. May his touch heal and liberate us all! As he names us, "Daughter, son," may we accept his true shelter, his unsettling freedom. By his grace we can share in that sheltering freedom together.