

A Little Exodus

August 21, 2022 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: Luke 13: 10-17

At first glance, especially given the context of today's service, this appears to be another of Jesus' miraculous healing stories. And our first response may well be "if only it were so easy!" No doubt this woman's trials were severe, and for 18 years no less, and yet I know for a fact that some of us have physical ailments or emotional weights we've been carrying that have left us bent over for what feels like as long, and with no miracles in site, despite our most fervent prayers. So, what's the real invitation for us here, especially as we prepare for a time for healing prayer? I think there are two.

The first has to do with the wider context of the passage which is really as much about sabbath keeping as it about healing. Jesus' argument for healing on the Sabbath is based on biblical principles. But he remembers that there are at least two ways to observe the Sabbath! There's the one from Exodus, which frames the practice as an imitation of God who rests on the seventh day. We know that one! The synagogue leaders know that one. It's why they take issue with Jesus "working" on the Lord's Day! But the other reference is in Deuteronomy which frames the practice as a form of remembering the exodus from slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy 5 - 'Remember you were held captive in Egypt and so remember the Sabbath and keep it holy!' As one commentator puts it: "Like a "little exodus" each week, keeping the sabbath day releases us from toil, simultaneously reminding us of the divine [liberation] at the heart of our lives and providing us with a foretaste of the Promised Land, the "milk and honey" toward which all history is [bending]."¹ Seen in this light, Jesus' healing words to the woman are carefully chosen. "Woman, you are set free from your ailment," he says! What better way to remember the Sabbath and to bring healing but through this invitation to taste and know God's deepest desire for our freedom and delight! We should consider this every Sunday and every Sabbath - a little exodus, a little taste of God's freedom for our lives and our souls.

The second is an invitation to take seriously whatever it is that may be ailing us, or holding us captive, and to take it to God in prayer and let God in Christ hold it with you. Retired Methodist pastor Steve Garnas Holmes puts it this way in a poetic commentary on just this passage. He begins with a quote: She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. He begins in a spirit of genuine wonder and curiosity...

*What is bent over in you?
What is pushed over, put down,
made weak, or silenced?
What beauty is hidden,
what capacity stilled?
What in you is bound up,
distorted, facing downward?*

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/8/19/unbound-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eleventh-week-after-pentecost>

*How have you given up hope?
How have you been told that you can't?
That you deserve it?
That this is not the time for healing?*

His questions cut to the heart of our often-self-defeating assumptions, and at the same time, they break open room, set us free even, for something new, by God's grace. Let me read them again in case you zero in on something that you might want to bring forward in a moment.

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What is pushed over, put down,
made weak, or silenced?
What beauty is hidden,
what capacity stilled?
What in you is bound up,
distorted, facing downward?*

*How have you given up hope?
How have you been told that you can't?
That you deserve it?
That this is not the time for healing?*

After asking these questions, Garnas Holmes ends with an almost pitch perfect for this moment invitation for us all. He writes:

*Let the bent over woman in you come forward.
Let Jesus lay a healing hand on her.
Don't expect instant change, but know this:
the spirit that distorts you
is not as strong as love.*

The 'Spirit that distorts you is not as strong as love.' Amen!
Siblings, it's a spirit of freedom, one that is seeking your internal liberation so that we can all have a share in God's eternal joy.

On this little Exodus, may we too remember the Sabbath, keep it holy, and let God's healing and wholeness and strength set us free from whatever is ailing us today!