

Set Free Anyway

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 25, 2019
Text: Luke 13:10-17

I am very happy to report that yesterday we at the church were set free from a whole lot of “stuff” that had been accumulating downstairs as a result of our very successful yard sale. We were also set free from a lot of other people’s stuff that had been donated for the sale to benefit the church. And benefit the church it did – to the tune of just over \$800. We were also set free to use this outdoor yard sale approach for the first time, and quickly realized that our upper parking lot is the perfect place for such an event because of its incredible visibility to passing traffic. Some of us even had a conversation about what else we might be able to do out there on our very own outdoor stage of sorts – the upper parking lot now surrounded by beautiful gardens and gently rolling lawn. We weren’t sure, honestly, how all this would work out but this outdoor yard sale using this new format of \$5 a bag or make an offer was successful beyond anything we had imagined. We were set free anyway by our willingness to take a chance and do a new thing. Amazing!

This transforming notion of freedom, of being set free anyway, despite everything we might do to keep such scary freedom at a distance, is what I’d like us to focus on as we

consider this morning's text – the healing of the bent over woman from the Gospel of Luke. This is a richly nuanced story which brings to light so many different issues – treatment of women, rigidity of systems and structures, even theological debate about what constitutes work and what doesn't. But for us this morning, we're going to examine this story from the perspective of freedom, a notion much at the forefront of too many debates in our country right now and all too often for the wrong reason.

Freedom is the central element in this story. What does Jesus say to the woman after calling her over to him? He said, "woman, you are set free from your ailment." Woman, you are set free from your ailment. He didn't say, as he does on other occasions of healing someone, "woman, you are healed" or even "woman, your sins are forgiven." Clearly the woman had an illness or injury or physical defect of some sort that required healing but he didn't say, "you are healed." He also didn't say "your sins are forgiven" which he did say on other occasions because sin and illness were very much connected in the minds of people in Jesus' day. If you were ill or hurting it was either because you were possessed by an evil spirit or because you or your parents had committed some sin and your infirmity was your punishment for that sin.

But Jesus didn't talk about being healed or being forgiven. Jesus talked to the woman about being set free. "Woman, you are

set free from your ailment.” Freedom. That’s what this healing was all about. Freedom. Freedom from illness. Freedom from the narrowest field of vision one can imagine since this infirmity forced her to keep her eyes only on the ground and her own feet. Think about that for a moment. This woman had been crippled for 18 years. Bent over for eighteen years. That’s a lifetime of downcast eyes, a lifetime of looking at dirt and mud and who knows what else. That’s a lifetime of seeing only the bottom part of life. “Woman, you are freed from your ailment.” How unbelievable that must have sounded to her! Impossible, she must have thought. He can’t be talking to me, she had to be thinking. And then, he came over to her and laid his hands on her. Laid his hands on her!! No wonder the text says she immediately stood up straight and began praising God. And we can just hear her, can’t we? Hallelujah! Praise God! Thank you Jesus!! I don’t have to look at any more feet! I can look up and see the things all around me. I can see the faces of my family. I can see the flowers in the garden. I can feel the sun on my face. Praise God! I can’t believe it!

Yes, we can almost hear it. Until her joyous praise is drowned out by the grumbling voices of the religious leaders. “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” The woman probably stopped short and just stared, tears filling her

eyes. She knew then that hadn't seen her, noticed her, paid any attention to her on all those other days when she had come before to pray for deliverance from her suffering. How could they possibly be angry with her for finding help in God's house on the sabbath? Luckily, Jesus took his freedom fight for her right to them. "You hypocrites! Does not each of you untie his ox or donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? Ought not this woman, this daughter of Abraham, ... be set free from this bondage on the sabbath?" Again, the woman could scarcely believe what she was hearing. Did he really call her "daughter of Abraham?" She was, of course as a Jew, a daughter of Abraham, but to have such a title of honor be used to describe her, someone who just minutes earlier had not looked up from the ground in 18 years, was simply incredible. What was happening here?

Jesus did several truly incredible things in this story and all of them center on his particular notion of freedom and how freedom is central to one's identity as beloved of God. First, this is one of the only times when Jesus approached someone to offer healing instead of being asked for the healing first. He saw her need and reached out to her. He knew that she couldn't see him because her line of sight was so limited. He knew what she needed, what she deserved, and he offered it to her without hesitation. He gave her back her life when he gave her freedom of

movement. He gave it without being asked. Because as a person beloved of God, she deserved nothing less.

Second, Jesus didn't care that the leaders of the synagogue found fault with him for healing on the sabbath. People always mattered more to Jesus than rules, liturgical or otherwise. People in need always came first with Jesus. He never worried about whether or not they deserved the help he offered. He just knew they needed help. They needed to be set free from whatever kept them from living their best lives and set himself free from rigid, mindless systems that restricted his ability to help them when he saw they needed it.

Third, Jesus set the woman free not only from her affliction but also the critical judgment of the religious leaders. He didn't just stand there while they complained to the crowd that the woman had no business showing up to be healed on the sabbath. He took her side and in the most powerful way he could, by calling her a daughter of Abraham – a Jewish woman worthy of respect. He freed her from their criticism of her and he did it by shaming them in front of the crowd for their heartless rigidity. Don't be ridiculous, Jesus says. You know it is permitted on the sabbath to free an animal and take it to get a drink and you do it. How dare you say this woman isn't as important as an animal? Wow. That's a slap in the face for sure. And, the crowd loved it.

Freedom. Freedom from affliction for the woman. Freedom from rigid ritualistic rules than stand in the way of helping someone in need. Freedom from worry about what people think. Freedom to be who it is God created you to be. That's what Jesus is illustrating for us in this story. It's not about the healing, important as that is. It's not about breaking the rules for the sake of breaking rules. It's not about honoring women, critical as that is. This story is about freedom and how Jesus understands freedom, how he puts it into practice. Jesus sees freedom as expansive, including everyone simply because they are beloved of God. Jesus, in this story, uses freedom to show the liberating power of God to change someone's life, to change systems, to change the world. And it happens one person at a time. Key to understanding how Jesus puts freedom into practice is to see in his refusal to be bound by ritualistic rules and traditions the recognition that people, the central part of God's beloved Creation, always matter more than rules and systems. In other words, there is no occasion, Jesus would say, where a system or an institution or a set of rules and rituals, is more important than the people they are meant to serve. People matter more, always, no matter what. People are worthy of assistance, of respect, of mercy, of kindness – just because they are people. They don't have to prove anything. They don't have to earn anything. They don't have to be "somebody," whatever that means, because

everybody – *literally every body* -- is somebody important to God.

I wanted us to think about freedom together this morning because it's a word we hear getting tossed around a lot these days and often in ways that have very little to do with freedom and more to do with people believing they have a right to restrict the freedom of others because it's somehow a threat to their "freedom of religion." No. The truth is that the only threat to their freedom of religion is the sin they accumulate every time they act on the belief that God gives them the right to hate people who do not believe as they do, live as do, love as they do. In this country, our country, freedom of religion means that you have the right to believe whatever you want and to put that belief into practice as it makes sense to you, without restriction, as long as it does not hurt anyone else. No one can force you to believe one thing or another. Nor can anyone force you *not* to believe something. But, freedom of religion does not give anyone the right to rob someone else of their freedom of thought or action because it is offensive to their particular religious faith and practice. No. Just no.

Freedom of religion is just one of those issues which is what is called a wedge issue – an issue created by political operatives for the sole purpose of dividing the electorate into "us and them." Wedge issues became a central political tool in the 1990's and they are the reason this country is so divided at this moment in

time. Immigration, gun control, abortion, gay marriage, even prayer in public schools – these are all wedge issues which are tearing our country apart and they all have everything to do with how we understand freedom. The division has gotten so far out of control on these issues, fanned into conflagration by certain political operatives on both sides of the political divide for their own benefit, that it's virtually impossible for folks with differing opinions to sit down and attempt to talk about them. And when you suggest giving it a try, as I am doing now with the clergy association, it's a real uphill battle. Dear friends, this should not be!!! Jesus' heart must be breaking when he hears people who call themselves Christian but resist with all their might anything they decide is wrong because of their faith in Jesus. But what is this freedom they argue "others" are trying to infringe on simply by insisting that all people are people deserving of love and respect? Freedom to do what, exactly? Demonize immigrants in the name of "laws"? Sorry but using that logic means that no one ever should get away from any sort of traffic violation like speeding. No one should ever get a second chance at anything. Somehow, I don't believe this is what these folks want.

And what other freedoms are they arguing are inviolate no matter what? Stockpiling military grade weapons in your home just in case? Exclude LGBTQA folks from basic human rights? Force children with very different faith traditions to pray a

Christian prayer before they can learn to read? Really? Where is Jesus' sense of freedom in this? Seems to me that we get so hyper-focused on who's on what side of whatever issue is currently being argued about that we bend ourselves into pretzels. We make ourselves into the bent over woman once more, narrowing our gaze to the lowest thing we can see, focusing on feet and dirt and pock-marked pavement. And when we do that, dear friends, we lose sight of Jesus completely. When we do that, we relinquish the very freedom he died to bring to us.

So, dear friends, time to hear Jesus calling to us and hearing his promise to set us free from our ailments – our fears, our worries, our anger. Time to stand up straight and see where it is we can make a difference in this angry, fragile world in which we live. Time to celebrate that Jesus knows our names, Jesus gifts us with freedom to be fully who it is God created us to be and that Jesus loves everyone – absolutely everyone – exactly as he loves each one of us. Time to pray for the people we most disagree with and remind ourselves that God loves them too. Time to step up and be the change in the world we need so desperately. Easy? Heck no. Worth the effort? You bet. How do we do it? One day at a time, with the love of God, the freeing power of Jesus and the gentle guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thank God we're here to help each other because none of us could ever do any of this alone.

Amen.