

Year C: Proper 16 Jer 1:4-10; Ps 71:1-6; Heb 12:18-29; Lk 13:10-17
St. Barnabas, Florissant – August 25, 2019

Focus Sentence: How would you like to be known as “the bent woman”?

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

If you’ve been here the past several Sundays, you know that our Old Testament readings have been proclaiming harsh and judgmental words from the likes of Amos and Hosea, from Isaiah, and this morning from Jeremiah. While this morning’s reading describes the call of Jeremiah to be God’s prophet (despite Jeremiah’s protests that he is too young for the job), Jeremiah himself describes that job given by God (which will unfold in the coming chapters of the book named for him) this way: “See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow....” Yep, more of the prophetic fire and brimstone is coming.

But I hope you noticed something else in this morning’s reading from Jeremiah, that last phrase: “...to build and to plant.” We sometimes forget that the Old Testament prophets weren’t just about fire and destruction; they *were* preaching fire and brimstone in the hope of calling the people of Israel back to lives faithful and responsive to the will of God. Using Jeremiah’s imagery, we must remember that “plucking up” (weeds, for example), “pulling down” overgrown trees, or even destroying and overthrowing in God’s “garden” are actions that need to happen before new growth (that “building and planting” that Jeremiah talks about) can occur.

PAUSE

Just like Jesus overthrowing the established order on the Sabbath, as he does in this morning’s Gospel reading. It’s almost as though Jesus does these shocking things in order to get our attention, and to awaken us to the possibility of new growth.

And, if you recall last Sunday’s Gospel reading about division and conflict, you’ll remember Jesus’ words: “Do you think that I’ve come to bring *peace* to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather *division*.” Opening ourselves to *new* possibilities, to *new* people, seems so often to bring division. As it does today in the synagogue.

PAUSE

The story that takes place in the synagogue on this particular Sabbath is a story about “the bent woman.” By the way, how would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? This woman has been bent over, staring at the ground, back terribly contorted, for many, many years. She doesn’t appear to have a name to anyone in town. When they see her, creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to look up from the ground, they don’t say, “Here comes Mary,” or “Look, it’s Elizabeth.” They simply say, “Here comes the *bent* woman, the *crippled* woman.”

That’s her name and in her name is her life, her destiny, her whole sad fate. ... The woman *doesn’t* have a name, other than the one give to her by the town, a name based on her disability. ... She’s there, I believe, for everyone who is similarly named. She’s “just a drunk,” or “slow,” “stupid,” “grossly overweight,” “blind as a bat,” “the gimp.”

PAUSE

But now, she’s encountered by Jesus. Jesus *heals* her, and that’s *wonderful*. For the first time in her adult life, she’s able to stand up straight, to look straight ahead, to be restored to what we might call a normal life. But maybe *just* as wonderful is the way Jesus speaks to her. He doesn’t call her disabled, or hindered, or a victim of life’s unfairness, although from most points of view, that’s what she is.

Jesus doesn’t seem to have any interest at all in making her a professional *victim*, so that her disability defines her whole life. Instead, Jesus calls her “a daughter of Abraham.” And that’s extremely significant. ... Abraham was the great, great granddaddy of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, a *promise* was given. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, a nation through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

PAUSE

And so she's a "daughter of Abraham." She's an heir to the blessings of God. Still more, as a daughter of Abraham, she too is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She's meant for more than a superficial, cruel and limiting label. She, bent over though she may have been, is part of God's great plan of salvation of the entire world!

PAUSE

So she stands up straight. Even if her back hadn't been healed by Jesus, I think that now she would have stood up straight. Her life has been caught up in God's amazing promises to the world. Her life has been renamed, not as a long story of injustice, victimization, and sadness, but as part of the great drama of God's redemption. Let's remember her, therefore, not as just one more, sad victim, not as the "bent woman," but as a daughter of Abraham.

PAUSE

You'd think that would be cause for rejoicing, and in Luke's account it is, at least for "the crowd" gathered in the synagogue that Sabbath day. But, unfortunately, not for everybody. "The leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to [that same] 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.'"

You know, before we're too harsh or judgmental with that synagogue leader, let's admit that he does have a point. The Sabbath is precious to good Jews. It's a day of rest, when NO work should be done, and it's not given to us just for a deserved rest; it's given so that we can spend time in God's presence, praying and giving thanks and praise to God. So, yes, come back tomorrow and be cured!

PAUSE

Yes, Jesus stirs things up by healing the woman on the sabbath (and probably more so, by calling a woman over to him in the men's part of the synagogue, and even by *touching* a woman not related to him), but Jesus does these things while the need is evident, the time is ripe ---- there really isn't a good reason, legalistic concerns aside, to deny this woman a cure today that will change her life and very identity.

PAUSE

A Sioux Medicine Man, remarkably named Lame Deer, wrote something several years ago, and it's definitely food for thought:

He writes, "The trouble with white religion in America is this: If I tell a preacher that I met Jesus standing near me in the supermarket, he will say that this could not happen. He'll say, 'That's impossible; you're crazy.' By this he is denying his own religion. He has no place to go. Christians who no longer believe that they could run into Christ at the next street corner, what are they?"

Sisters and brothers, the point is that if you and I aren't prepared to run into Jesus and his uncomfortable expectations here and now --- his demands on how we live our lives --- what are we doing calling ourselves Christians?

What excuses do we give for *not* responding to those in need? Are those excuses "religious" ones? Do we plead "rules" and how it's just not *proper*? Do they have more to do with *ourselves* and OUR identity and expectations than with Jesus'?

Luke tells us that Jesus again uses the phrase, "You hypocrites!" when he confronts the religious complainers. And we're told too that "his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing."

Let us pray this morning that we will be *willing* to stir things up, to overturn the established rules, when it comes time to share God's mission to this world, and to heal the sufferings of our fellow human beings. We **can** be willing, you know, with God's help.

AMEN