

The Rev. Joan M. Kilian

Trinity Episcopal Church

Jeremiah 1: 4 – 10  
 Hebrews 12: 18 – 29

Psalm 71: 1 - 6  
 Luke 13: 10 – 17

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Imagine for just a moment that you are sitting in the synagogue where Jesus is teaching. You've heard that this itinerant rabbi was coming to preach and teach and you've come to hear him for yourself. You know everyone in the synagogue because you've grown up with them in the village. You know the synagogue leaders and the president of the assembly. And you know this bent, crippled woman who walks in, not just stooped, but bent over almost at a right angle. She sells baskets in the market each week. Was it an accident or an illness that caused this? She's been this way for so long that nobody, except perhaps her, really recalls. But the only way that she can ever look into your eyes, or that you can look into hers is if she can sit down and you can sit at her feet. But who would do that with her? She's just a frail woman struggling through life, nobody special.

Right away though, you notice that *Jesus* has noticed this woman. There is a look of deep compassion on his face. And your eyes follow his back to this woman and you begin to her anew. Jesus calls to her and she shuffles over. He reaches out his hands, perhaps laying them on her head or shoulders, or even cupping her face in his hands and raising her face so that she can see him and he can see her. "Woman," Jesus says, "You are freed from your affliction. Liberated from the things that have kept you twisted and bent." And with the vigor and flexibility of a young woman, she stands up straight for the first time in so many years. Her eyes, brimming with tears of gratitude, look fully into Jesus' eyes, and then, as she turns, they take in the whole spectrum of the room which she has only been able to see sideways or partially until now. The wideness of God's mercy is visible in the glory, the delight that illuminates her face.

But the joy of this moment is cut short as the rasping, angry voice of the synagogue president rolls out like thunder over the assembly. Seemingly directing his words to the crowd, he is really addressing this itinerant rabbi who has obviously upstaged him and usurped some of his perceived power. The president calls out to the people, "Look, you've got 6 other days of the week to come get healed! This is NOT what the Sabbath is for! You know perfectly well that no work can be done on the Sabbath!"

Jesus, who is on his way to Jerusalem and the cross with his disciples, doesn't mince any words. "Hypocrites!" he says to the president and his council, "you're fine with untying your own animals on a Sabbath so that they can be pastured and watered. Why isn't it right for this daughter of Abraham, tied up by the adversary these 18 years, to also be untied and nurtured?"

Like watching a tennis match, your eyes and those of everyone else in the room go back and forth between these two men in this awkward moment, this struggle between human power and divine grace. The president has been clearly in charge until this moment when a hand, a touch, a healing, changes everything. Jesus has pointed out none-to-subtly the double standard by which not just this assembly, but the whole people of Israel, have been living.

"This daughter of Abraham" is how Jesus refers to this woman whom he has presumably just seen for the first time. What is Jesus really saying about her? First, Jesus is saying that she is not a nobody; she is someone. In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, God formed her in the womb and knew her, just as God has everyone else. Jesus is saying that she counts just as much as the synagogue

hierarchy does because she is also a child of God, she is part of the family and she is not to be denied God's grace.

Secondly, Jesus notes that she has been tied up, bound for 18 years. You wonder how Jesus knows how long this has been the case if he has just met her. But as you watch the goings-on, you suddenly have the realization that there is so much more here than meets the eye. Yes, this woman is healed. But she is merely a symbol of what Jesus, God, is willing – and longing – to do for all of Israel. All these many years, Israel has been hogtied by the power of the adversary, believing that only rigid adherence to laws such as the Sabbath is the answer, and completely missing the point of *why* the laws are there in the first place and what they are intended to nurture. Jesus' message is that the only real answer, the only real healing, the only real hope, is the eternal one, the Kingdom of God, overflowing with grace and mercy, not circumscribed by any human ideas of power and propriety.

Jesus' accusers are silenced while the woman and the whole gathering rejoice in the wonderful things that Jesus has said and done. What we don't hear in today's reading are the several verses that follow where Jesus compares the kingdom to a mustard seed that becomes a huge tree, and to leaven, or yeast, which in just small quantities is enough to spread throughout all of the dough. One action in the synagogue? So what? How can that change the world? How can that bring in the kingdom? Well, no matter how insignificant that one act seems, it has the power to grow and to spread beyond all belief. It is only one healing of one woman, but each time the grip of power by the things of this world that tie us up in knots is loosened and undone, another victory is won. And that victory will ripple out in repercussions, like a pebble cast into a lake.

So what is there in this passage for us this day? In a world in which craziness and terror seem to reign, we are on a constant seesaw of hope and despair. Hope that God really IS in charge and that the world will be redeemed, and despair at the awful things that we humans are capable of doing to one another and to the earth. Joan Chittister, the Roman Catholic Benedictine nun, writes about that:

"Hope and despair are not opposites," she writes. "They are cut from the very same cloth, made from the very same material, shaped from the very same circumstances. Most of all, every life finds itself forced to choose one from the other, one day at a time, one circumstance after another. The only difference between the two is that despair shapes an attitude of mind; hope creates a quality of soul. Despair colors the way we look at things, makes us suspicious of the future, makes us negative about the present. Hope, on the other hand," she continues, "takes life on its own terms, knows that whatever happens God lives in it, and expects that, whatever the twists and turns, it will ultimately yield its good to those who live it well."

"When tragedy strikes, when trouble comes, when life disappoints us, we stand at the crossroads between hope and despair, torn and hurting. Despair cements us in the present; hope sends us dancing around dark corners trusting in a tomorrow we cannot see. Despair says that there is no place to go but here. Hope says that God is waiting for us someplace else. Begin again."

(Joan D. Chittister, O.S. B., *The Psalms: Meditations for Every Day of the Year*, p. 44)

It is so easy for us to look at the headlines, whether local or national or world, and think that things are in such a mess, we are so tied up, bound and doubled over, that there is no possibility of healing, of life seen from a whole new perspective, of *standing* before God and knowing that God IS in each moment, each place. This passage from Luke assures us that we are liberated in God. And that

each liberation, each act of unbinding, no matter how small, that we do in this world in the name of Jesus, is a step towards living in the Kingdom of God.

In Eucharistic Prayer B, we say to God, "In him [Jesus], you have delivered us from evil, and made us worthy to STAND before you." That sounds an awful lot like what happens to the woman in today's Gospel. Some Episcopal churches use this prayer all through the season of Easter as a reminder that we do not have to grovel or cower or remain tied and bound, that Jesus stands willing and longing to help us, to liberate us, to make us worthy of standing before God. The question is, will we allow Jesus to do this for us?

Let us close with a prayer adapted from Kathy Galloway

*(Talking to the Bones, p. 82).*

*God of many names, our names are known to you. We are held in the hand of your life, and we do not know what you will make of us. All we know is that we cannot make ourselves any more than we could in our mothers' wombs. But this we can do, this we choose, to give ourselves into the hand of your continuing creativity. Our past, with its joys and triumphs, its failures and regrets. Our present, with its struggles and accomplishments, its hopes and setbacks. Our future, with its fears and freedom, its pain and promise. To loose and to bind, to stretch and to shape, to become what we will, trusting the hand that made the world, trusting the spirit that breathes life, trusting the love that will not let us go, trusting the promise of the Word made flesh." Amen. +*