

HEALING FROM OUR ISMS

A sermon by David Story

Luke 13:10-16

July 25, 2010

The Gospel lesson today gives a few details about a woman's interaction with the Holy One. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue one day...no, it was one Sabbath Day.

The woman does not have a name or a country of origin. We are told one thing about her. She had a condition that had bowed her down for 18 years. 18 years weighted down with this "spirit caused illness". She was bent double and could not stand erect.

Then Jesus appeared. He called her over and spoke words of healing to her. She immediately stood upright and began praising God.

Whatever this thing was, it had kept her from living out her purpose as a creation of God for 18 years. Suddenly she heard the love of God in her life and she stood erect.

It would be a good story if it ended there. But the woman's healing is totally lost in the words of the synagogue official, the voice of the church, which complained about the work of God being done on the Sabbath. Suddenly the focus was directed to him and the institution of the synagogue. Suddenly the point of the story is that Jesus should not heal on the Sabbath.

Jesus calms the storm here by putting the Synagogue official in his place. It might be good to note here that woman did not come seeking healing for her infirmity. She probably would not have sought it there because the men and women were separated by the Rules of the Synagogue. But Jesus called her over to him.

But I want to look at the woman again. She was bent double, weighed down, crippled by something....a spirit caused illness as the gospel says. In her

interaction with Jesus she fell victim to a bigger problem called denominationalism----the religion of the day.

I have my own story of another woman. While I was chaplain in Wake Medical Center in Raleigh, we were instructed to leave our denominationalism outside the building. I was called one day to a room on Labor and Delivery. I received the sad news that woman's baby had died before birth. In fact the baby was not even full term. I listened to her story. Here was the problem. Her baby would be removed by surgery. She wanted her baby named and baptized and was told this would not be possible. I was stuck. After a long conversation with my supervisor and a prayer for guidance, I had the answer. So I took a partner chaplain back to the room armed with my communion supplies and my portable baptism kit. When I explained what we would do, she was happy. So we celebrated communion and thanked God for this new life and asked for strength for this young mother. So she bared part of her stomach and we made the sign of the cross with the baptism waters and proclaimed this child's name is JOSHUA. We left and the nurses prepped her for surgery. She was at peace.

Now, we are in the meeting room discussing the day's patients and my denominational representative said, "You can't do that!" Baptizing a baby would be bad enough but doing it that way is just wrong. Now I ask you, which is more important, following my denominations rules or this woman experiencing the rich Grace of God in her life when she was in such need.

So what about us? What kind of spirit is causing us to be bowed down, crippled? We need to put ourselves in the place of the woman. What would be our response if Jesus called us over to be healed of our spirit caused illness or isms?

Dr. Martin Luther King wrestled with many of these isms as he worked toward creating "The beloved community".

In 1960, he answered the call to help students at Morehouse College and he put other things aside to join a sit in there in Atlanta. He was summarily arrested and taken before a court in DeKalb County charged with a minor traffic violation. It was there that Judge Oscar Mitchell found him guilty and for the first time in history, sentenced a man to four months hard labor for a minor traffic violation. He was taken at 4 AM, shackled put into a prison truck and driven 230 miles to the Reidsville State Prison.

From his cell he wrote his wife. He said he did not understand why or how but he believed that something good would come of this and the city of Atlanta; the State of Georgia and the nation would be changed for the good. That same week, a Senator from Massachusetts, little known to us in Georgia, took a stand against the conviction. The judge soon reversed the decision and the case became known as "the arrest heard round the world." So it was that in 1960 the Presidential election was affected and the course of history for America was changed.

Dr King confronted the "isms" that were blocking his dream of a beloved community in the world Primary of which was racism. His battleground was the era of separate water fountains, separate doctors waiting rooms, and separate-but-equal education systems; that back of the bus mentality so prevalent in the South. But he was interested in Justice for all people. Poverty, government brutality to its people, even churches and religion were in his sights. That is why he said that the most segregated hour in America was 11 AM on Sunday morning.

Sam Oni is a name you may not know. His story is told in "Ashes for Breakfast" a novel about my school, Mercer University in Macon, GA. Sam came to America, a product of Southern Baptist Mission work in Ghana. On his first Sunday he went to church at Tattnell Square Baptist Church where he was met at the door by deacons telling him he was not welcome. It was the 60's in the South. He not only cannot join but he couldn't attend. Later a

Methodist congregation agreed to accept him, but only because "he was not your average Black man." (their words)

My friend, Josh, a minister at St Mark in Atlanta is also an advocate for death row inmates in the Georgia Penal System. He says he is working against the death penalty. One of his charges, Frank, already on Death Row for two years, is scheduled for execution. But in his work with Josh he had heard the gospel and wanted to be baptized. But death row inmates can have no human contact, so no way for Josh to baptize him. Although he knew nothing of the United Methodist Church Josh worked for, he still wanted it. So picture it. Josh is outside the cell and the prisoner is inside kneeling on the concrete floor with a bucket of water in front of him. When Josh asked him if he desired to follow Jesus, Frank picked up the bucket and poured it over his head. Josh proclaimed that here was a "Child of God". Unorthodox, I know but I don't believe a baptism in the largest cathedral could have been as beautiful as that one.

Revisit the woman. She is quite a picture. A woman, barely able to make it through life, unable to stand erect, oppressed.... caused by a spirit.

Could we put ourselves in her place? What spirits are causing us to be weighed down, oppressed, not able to be what God created us to be. What learned ideas and beliefs are keeping us back?

You are called to work toward the beloved community. We cannot do that if we are crippled with racism, nationalism, sexism, and homophobia, even denominationalism.

Bell Hooks said, "If we want a beloved community we must stand for justice, and have recognition for difference with out attaching difference to privilege."

When we do that, injustice happens:

- I am better than you because I was born White and you are Black
- I am better than you because I am a heterosexual and you are gay, lesbian or transgendered
- I am better than you because I am Baptist and our way is the right way
- I am better than you because I am a natural born American and you are anything else

My first church had a sign outside which said, "All Are Welcome." When I questioned that statement, I was told that it only meant that if you looked like us. I talked to my Professor, Dr. Howard Giddens. His most profound wisdom always started with, "Now Son". So he said, "Now Son, there are going to have to be a lot of funerals for the church to change."

Jesus called the woman to Him and offered healing. That same healing is still available today if we want to be healed. Do we? For some of us it may mean letting go of some hurt feelings and disappointment from years ago; it may mean letting go of ideas and prejudices; it may even mean understanding that we have to find new ways to be the people of God at First Baptist Church.

We can still do the work of the creator but it may not be in the same way as in our recent history.

The invitation is there:

- To be made right
- To healing
- To wholeness
- To stand erect and work towards building the beloved community.

One of my favorite writers is Dr. John Claypool, a former Southern Baptist Minister who found his way into another form of ministry. In his book, "Opening Blind Eyes", he describes his struggle in trying to be the person God called him to be. He doubted his call. His marriage failed. His daughter, Laura died from leukemia. Then another minister suggested a support group for the local pastors because where does a pastor go for Pastoral Counseling?

Dr. Claypool says that between his ears he knew about Grace, and faith justification and mercy and forgiveness but the other parts of him had not yet heard the message. To him Grace was a concept not an event. In one particularly gut wrenching session, John had poured out his heart to the group.

He felt naked, alone. Then his least favorite minister in the group spoke and said I hear you John. We have all been there. Do you know what WE need? We need to hear the gospel down in our guts. Jesus said in his sermon, you are the light of the world. He didn't say you have to earn light or be number one to get light. He said you are Light. If we could just get that then we could go on and let our light shine and other people would see the good thing God has created and give glory to God. ¹

I think that when Jesus summoned the woman to him that day in the synagogue, several things happened. She stood upright and praised God. But I would be willing to bet you that she also felt the gospel down in her gut that day. God really loves me. God really loves us and desires that we be who we were created to be not what we have learned. God offers healing.

Grace, Grace, God's Grace. Grace that will pardon and cleanse within.

Grace, Grace, God's Grace. Grace that is greater than all my sin. ²

In the name of the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. Amen!

¹ "Opening Blind Eyes", John R. Claypool; Abingdon Press, Nashville; 1983.

² "Grace Greater than our Sin" Words by Julia H. Johnson (1849-1919).