

Text: Luke 13: 10-17
Title: Bigger than the Container
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Down the block and around the corner there was a haunted castle. At least it looked like that to the kids in our neighborhood.

Two stories of brick and stone with a slate roof and oddly shaped windows covered with security bars, it was a dramatic stately home, but years of neglect had taken their toll. Overgrown evergreens leaned into the house, the windows were curtained, the lawn raggedy, the paint peeling, and you had to bushwhack to get to the door. There was nothing warm and welcoming. It felt dark and foreboding.

An old couple – small of stature and reclusive – lived in this castle. The woman was bent over. Not crooked or stooped; I mean bent at the waist at 90 degrees. Every once in a while, you'd see her walking in the yard – her eyes on her feet, her arms tucked back to keep from dangling, her gait slow and unsteady. In order for her to see you she had to crane her neck, strain her head up, and look out of the tops of her eyes. She couldn't sustain that position for longer than a sentence or two and she'd drop her head below her shoulders. "Downcast" would come to my mind.

This morning's text brings her to mind....

Jesus was teaching in a Galilean synagogue on the sabbath. Chances are that the space was small and mostly stone – with men on benches on one side, women and children on the other. A literal reading of the Greek is that one of those women was "bent over and not able to lift herself to the full." You can find scholarly speculation about what caused this infirmity. For example:

...a severe forward flexion of her spine, as occurs with orthopedic conditions such as ankylosing spondylitis. The challenges to her wellbeing that could result from this debilitating condition were neck and back pain, fatigue, difficulty breathing, heart problems related to inflammation of the aorta, and, potentially, feelings of frustration, vulnerability, or isolation...

Sounds horrible. Culturally there was also suspicion that her condition was the result of some spirit or some sin. No less than Jesus says, that "Satan kept her bound for 18 long years."

Therefore, her condition wasn't just physically challenging – with sitting, eating, drinking, walking, and getting dressed a daily struggle – but it's also easy to imagine that it was a harsh lonely existence.

However, in our story....

She doesn't ask for anything.
She doesn't come to Jesus for healing.
She doesn't do anything to draw attention to herself.
The text simply says that Jesus saw her.

Rev. Tony Van Zanten used to tell of dropping-off his children at a new school. As the only white kids in the school, his daughter was greeted by classmates calling her name. But when Tony pulled away, in the rearview mirror he saw his son, alone, his little hands desperately clinging to the chain-link fence, looking out, with his back to the playground. In Tony's telling he's the only one who saw his son; he's the only one who saw his loneliness and fear. Love sees what others don't....

That's the end of the story.

Tony still drives away.

He doesn't turn around, respond, or help.

In our text, Jesus sees the woman and calls her forward – healing her with a word and a touch. He sees her and then the initiative, the grace, the mercy, the healing is his....

And she stands up straight.

For the first time in eighteen years, she can lift herself to the full. She can roll her shoulders back, hold her head high, and look you in the eye. Thanks be to God! Makes you want to throw your hands up in astonishment and victory.

But from the other side of the room the man in charge clears his throat to call the synagogue back to order.

He knows his catechism and his confessions.

He knows that all things are to be done according to scripture.

He knows his religion inside and out – and this is out.

There is a time and place for everything and this is neither the time nor the place.

There are six days for this sort of thing, but this day, the sabbath, is for God.

You know the response. Jesus says something akin to the sabbath being made for humanity not humanity for the sabbath and that even animals get led to water. Religious rules are meant for human flourishing, for healing, for reconciliation, for restoration....

Therefore, it's easy to cast the elder of the synagogue as the bad guy. As one picking nits and keeping order, it's easy to paint him as the villain. We can imagine him saying, "If we let this slide, who knows what else will happen? There have to be rules. There have to be boundaries."

But, let's be clear....

This is not an anti-Jewish-law story. Jesus was a Jew. The disciples were Jews. They all were Jews – in a synagogue following Jewish law and tradition.

Neither is this an anti-sabbath keeping story. Central to a biblical understanding of creation and the ordering of human life is sabbath – six days for work and the seventh day for rest. In the creation account God rests. God takes a day off. And during Egyptian captivity sabbath became an essential part Israel's identity. There were no days off for slaves. And so, Israel's insistence on a sabbath is actually a declaration of independence from Pharaoh and all Pharaoh represents. Our value and identity are not in our work.

And as busy-driven-thoroughly-modern-consumers-capitalists-achievers-and-builders we'd be wise to heed the ordering of life with sabbath and sabbath keeping.

Dear friends, the issue in our text is not how to keep sabbath. The issue is that this fine-faithful-fellow missed the point. In the name of God's law, he missed God's love. Listen to John Buchanan's take:

The whole law is an expression of holy love. It is a gift. It is for the purpose of keeping the health and vitality of the community. Its restrictions—its no's—are to keep the bonds of community strong and the individuals in it healthy. The law always points to God and the mysterious reality of God's love. And here it is employed to resist and prohibit the expression of that love.

It is not an easy lesson for us to learn, however. Religion—with its paraphernalia, its customs and traditions and rituals and liturgies, its hymns and sacred writings and creeds—becomes an end in itself, the maintenance and protection of which becomes so important that people forget the original intent and incredibly act in ways that deny the original beauty and purity.

That is to say that our efforts at religious practice – while good, helpful, and right – are not big enough containers for the love of God. There will always be some mercy, some grace, some *hesed* that seeps out, that overflows, that can't be contained. Over and over again in the New Testament Jesus pushes beyond the boundaries to welcome, heal, and restore the outsider, the vulnerable, and the sinner.

Not by rule but by grace.

Not by law but by love.

Frederick Buechner died on Monday. He was for me a spiritual mentor. At times his writing kept me tethered to faith and to the church. And although an ordained Presbyterian, and for a time a chaplain, it turns out that he didn't regularly go to church because, "Most often when I go, I am bored out of my wits." He said of the congregations he visited,

The best thing that could happen to your church is for it to burn to the ground and for your fax and email machines to be burned up, and for your minister to be run over by a truck so that you have nothing left except each other and God. And then I say if you want to know what the original church was like, go to an AA meeting.

That seems a bit of an overstatement. Jesus isn't burning it to the ground. He's not dismantling the rites, roles and rules of faith communities. He's not tearing down the law; he's fulfilling the law....

Look. It seems to me that the trajectory of scripture is primarily outward – expansive and inclusive. It reaches out and it pulls in. The Bible is full of voices struggling with what that means and how to live that out, but the movement is beyond the barriers and the boundaries.

We thrive, we are more fully human, when we live by God's ordering of life, but the love of God is always bigger than the container. J.B. Phillips in the early 1960s in *Your God Is Too Small* puts it this way:

The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs. While their experience of life grows in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static.

Jesus wants the elder and the congregation gathered in the synagogue to know that God won't be contained by their frameworks.

I'm glad that scripture recognizes how debilitating lower-back pain can be. And I don't mean to minimize the miracle of the woman's healing in our text, but it also seems instructive that this physical pain is linked to some spiritual pain, to something that kept her downcast – and probably to a corresponding emotional/relational burden.

Therefore, it seems worth emphasizing that her healing was more than just physical. Her spirit went from downcast to standing straight and praising God.

It's relatively easy to recognize someone in physical pain – there's a limp, a bend, a slower labored movement. It's harder to see those in emotional or spiritual pain. But the pain is no less difficult, no less debilitating. And the healing process can take longer than fixing a back or mending a bone.

But the beginning place of healing is the same. Sabbath or not, the beginning place is welcoming, inclusion, and the love of a God who is not constrained by the boundaries that we create – not matter how sophisticated or sublime. The beginning place is a love so boundless that it entered into human suffering and death and stood up straight in resurrection.

When Jesus touched a woman who'd been bent over for eighteen years, she stood up straight, looked Jesus in the face, and praised God. And all the people joined in. May we do the same.

Amen.