Unrighteous Indignation
Luke 13:10-17
NUCC Traditional
25 August 2019

*PRAY*

A man tells the story of leaving a grocery store when he was approached by two small boys selling candy bars for their school band. The man told the boys, “I'll buy a chocolate bar from you on one condition. You eat it for me.” The boys agreed.

The man bought the chocolate bar and promptly handed it back to one little boy so that he could eat it. The boy shook his head and said, “I can't.”

“Why not?” the man asked.

The boy looked at him gravely in the eye and said, “I'm not supposed to take candy from strangers.”

There's a child who knows how to follow the rules. He may not understand why he's not supposed to take candy from a stranger, but he understands the rules that his parents set for him. So, no matter the circumstance that he finds himself in, he keeps the rules. Consequently, at least on this occasion, he missed out on some free chocolate. I don't think I could be that obedient, do you?

And religious people love rules, don't we? Religion can be horribly repressive sometimes. And indeed, our text this morning certainly reflects that.

The story opens with Jesus teaching in a synagogue where services were normally informal: primarily prayers, reading of scripture, comments, and offerings for the poor. Any man in attendance could read from scripture and then teach or preach if he were so inclined, and, on this day apparently Jesus was.
Jesus noticed a woman, identified in scripture only as "crippled" and "bent over" — some disease that deteriorated the spine, maybe osteoporosis or scoliosis — a condition she had suffered for eighteen years. Jesus called to her to come forward. "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" Jesus laid hands on her and, voilà, immediately she straightened up.

Of course, we know there is more to the story. Enter the rabbi in charge. He thundered to the people, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Truth be told, what Jesus did was bound to cause a stir. He had healed this woman on the sabbath. That was a clear violation of the rules of God's commandment. And religious people love rules, don't we?

"Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. (Deuteronomy 5:12-14)

Healing is work; ask any doctor, nurse or medical technician.

Faithful Jews to this day are scrupulous about what may and may not be done on the sabbath. Some of the rules may sound nit-picky, but the tradition goes back to the days when the nation was in exile. Sabbath-keeping was, and still is, a way for Jews to preserve their unique identity. Through the centuries, the rabbis had set up all sorts of "fences" around the sabbath to assure its special place. By the time of Jesus, there were 1,521 things one could not do on the sabbath. And religious people love rules, don't we?
Then Jesus did this healing – work - and not even an emergency healing. In fact, the woman had not even asked to be healed. But Jesus did it anyway.

It is not much of a stretch to conclude that Jesus did it on purpose. Jesus knew the rules. And it is not that the rules were designed to be repressive. On the contrary, it was this commitment to the Sabbath that reminded the Jewish people who they were and whose they were.

There was not much the local synagogue leaders could say. In fact, the gospel writer sums the story up with, "... When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." (Luke 13:17).

Jesus could have spent all day arguing with the synagogue leader about whether it was legal to heal this woman on the sabbath while she remained ill. The healing took place before the discussion about whether it was the right thing to do.

Why is there any repressive religion in the world? Part of the answer is that folks take religion seriously. Week to week there are millions and millions and millions of people gathering for worship all around the globe. Far more people are related to churches on Sunday or synagogues on Saturday or mosques on Friday than are involved in any other voluntary activity.

Gallup polls in this country consistently find that more than 95% of the population professes belief in a god and 85% believe that the Ten Commandments are God's law and should be obeyed. As much as we hear of the decline of religion and the rise of secularism, the doomsayers have a long way to go before they ever see their prophecies fulfilled.
But I do wonder about the unrighteous indignation expressed by the people that day. And I think about the unrighteous indignation that the historic Church has professed over many years about the place and role of women. Perhaps the early church fathers are not to be blamed, since so many of our rules, particularly those around women, are based in scripture.

From the opening of Genesis where it is Eve, the evil woman, who convinces Adam, the clueless man, to eat forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life, ultimately causing all of us to be banned from the Garden forever. Or Mary Magdalene, in the New Testament, who is never called a prostitute in scripture, but was painted as one by the Catholic Church, causing the Church to have to name its sin and apologize centuries later. Or have you noticed how many times in scripture women are unnamed. The “woman at the well” or “the bent over woman.” Our sacred text rarely gives women the simplest dignity, the use of their name.

But I think about our modern era too. About my aunt, who just retired as a clergywoman in the United Methodist Church. At one point, she was senior pastor of the largest church led by a woman in that denomination across the world, but stories of the sexism that she endured would turn your stomach. Or how it was that not until seminary had my aunt ever heard another woman preach? I think about my clergy colleague in Dallas, who went to seminary and was ordained after a very full career in college administration. She tells the story of the Christmas Eve when she worshipped at her sister’s church and saw a woman assisting in worship leadership. She cried the entire service because she had always longed to do the same, but never had a role model
who led her to believe it was possible. She left her successful career and entered seminary the following fall.

I think about my friend in college, Sarah, who had the courage one night after a Bible Study to tell me that when I began prayers with “Father God…” she had trouble praying since her earthly father had abused her mother and abandoned them both at an early age. And I have never begun a public prayer that way again. Or my friend Debra, in seminary, who challenged me as a male with privilege to fight for the rights of women as she stood beside me fighting for the rights of LGBTQ persons.

These are many of the reasons that I have a commitment to ensuring that there are always both a male and a female who consecrate Communion, and why I insist that we alternate between men and women Moderators. It’s a reason that I have such a commitment to inclusive language, believing that God is far above gender and that we should not be a congregation that continues to oppress women in any form. I am proud that our Clergy Team is gender balanced, because I do not want any girl or young woman in this church to ever claim that she did not see strong and capable women leading in every aspect of our common life, and I never want my nieces to question that their uncle used his privilege to ensure an inclusive church. Religious people love rules, don’t we? Yet rules about exclusion of women, children, divorced people, and gay people have been more about keeping the already powerful in power than about glorifying the diversity of God and God’s creation. And that in and of itself is a sin.
Eighteen years - can you imagine seeing nothing but dirt, sand, and other people’s feet for eighteen years? Jesus offered this woman not just physical healing, but a whole new way to see the world...literally. And Jesus offers us the same gift.