

P11C 2025 Luke 13:10-17, Isaiah 58:9B-14

There is a story, albeit apocryphal, that a student once asked anthropologist Margaret Mead what she thought was the first sign of civilization, expecting her to say some kind of tool or weapon. But she answered “a healed femur” because where animals usually leave weak or injured members of the pack behind, a healed femur showed that someone fed, protected, and cared for the injured person until their leg mended. Her point was that the defining characteristic of human civilization is compassion. Fast forward tens of thousands of years until just about a decade ago; that’s when I developed a medical problem that left me doubled over like the woman from Luke’s gospel reading today, though thankfully for a much, much shorter time. That pain was a rude awakening for me, because aside from a kidney stone and a couple stitches when I fell off my bike, I had never experienced serious illness, injury, surgery, or hospitalization. But beyond the physical frustrations, I was shocked by how aggressively I had to advocate for myself in order to get medical treatment, especially since I knew how many thousands of dollars my employer and I myself spent for insurance that was supposed to guarantee that care. Yet I waited for days, sometimes weeks, for medications or procedures the doctors said I urgently needed to be approved by a computer algorithm. For all our technological advances, I’m not sure human civilization has made as much progress from Mead’s prehistoric broken leg as we’d like to think—not when we now have so many ways to help people, but sometimes we just don’t, especially if it’s not profitable.

Unlike some of Jesus’ other healing miracles, the woman in today’s story does not ask for Jesus’ help. She may have come to the synagogue hoping to see Jesus and hoping he could heal her, or she may have no idea he was there. There’s no reason to doubt that she attended every week, faithfully keeping the Sabbath holy as the commandments require. After eighteen years, even if she *hoped* for healing, it’s unlikely she *expected* it. In any event, she doesn’t approach Jesus; Jesus sees her at a distance, calls her over, announces that she is free from her ailment, and lays hands on her. Immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God. My chiropractor is good, but I don’t think he’s ‘fix 18 years of injury in one adjustment’ good. When we have to wait for respite, days, hours, even minutes can feel like an eternity, so imagine what 18 years of suffering would have been like for this woman. Jesus, seeing her condition and apparently knowing how long she has struggled, helps immediately. How could anyone want to delay her relief even one moment longer?

Well, anyone except the leader of the synagogue, who was indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath. “There are six days on which work should be done; come on those days to be cured, not on the Sabbath!” It’s interesting that he doesn’t directly address Jesus, the one who did the work of healing, but he lectures the people who are in need of care. And again, this woman didn’t ask Jesus to be healed; he offered—or really he just did it. We don’t know that she came to be healed, and even if she did, we don’t know that she only came on the Sabbath;

maybe she was there on weekdays when Jesus wasn't there. Maybe she came seven days a week for 18 years but the leader of the synagogue never paid attention to her. She would have been literally easy to overlook, bent over as she was. Yet Jesus sees her. He sees her need, he sees her long struggle, and he sees she is a daughter of Abraham, that is, a beloved child of God.

The leader of the synagogue was correct in saying that work was not to be done on the Sabbath. And that commandment included everyone—the Israelites and their children and their slaves and their livestock and the foreigners living in their land. In other words, we don't keep the Sabbath commandment by going out to Sunday brunch instead of cooking at home, because we're still causing someone to cook and serve and clean up after us. The ten commandments in Exodus tell us not to work on the Sabbath because God rested from the work of creation on the seventh day. But the ten commandments in Deuteronomy tell us not to work on the Sabbath with the reminder *that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm*. Sabbath rest was a completely new experience for formerly enslaved people who never had a day off from making bricks without enough straw. Sabbath is about pausing to trust how God provides for us, instead of only trusting ourselves as we work nonstop, *trampling the Sabbath by serving our own interests and pursuing our own affairs* as Isaiah puts it. But Sabbath is also about liberation.

Jesus' rhetorical question about untying animals and leading them to water on the Sabbath was not just a way of saying that the disabled woman deserved at least as much consideration as a farm animal. It was a reminder that the Sabbath was God's gift of freedom to people who had long lived in bondage. For the leader of the synagogue to be indignant that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath instead of elated that the woman was cured on the Sabbath suggests that he had missed at least part of the point of the Sabbath. In other stories Jesus tells people their faith has healed them or their sins are forgiven, but here, as if to emphasize his liberating action, he says *you are set free*. And woe to anyone who would try to keep captive those whom God has set free.

Looking at Christian history, we might wonder how many of our predecessors skipped over this story, because our religion, like most religions, too easily falls into the trap of turning faith from an invitation to freedom into a fence around narrow interpretations and practices, of twisting God's blessings into burdens. When we use religion to make someone else's life harder, instead of better, freer, and more abundant, we can be sure we've lost the plot, just as the leader of the synagogue had. To intentionally harm or even passively disregard others in the name of God, to make religious rules our reason for *not* helping when we could, that's what *taking the name of the Lord in vain* means. The Son of God would not let religious people use God's liberating Sabbath law as pretext to withhold compassion or prolong suffering. May we never look to our faith for excuses; instead, may we see those who need healing, just as Jesus sees us, and may we eagerly respond to God's call for us to help.