

Sunday: August 22, 2010

Scripture: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

Luke 13:10-17

Sermon: "It's Always Time For God's Grace"

Call to Worship: Adapted from Psalm 71

In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge

Let me never be put to shame.

Rescue me and deliver me in your righteousness;

Turn your ear to me and save me.

Be my rock of refuge, to which I can go

Give the command to save me

For you are my rock and fortress

For you have been my hope

O Sovereign Lord

My confidence since my youth

Do not cast me away when I am old

Do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

But as for me, I will always have hope

I will praise you more and more.

My mouth will tell of your righteousness;

Of your salvation all day long.

I will come and proclaim your mighty Acts

O Sovereign Lord:

I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone.

Hymns: Insert: "It Is Good to Sing Thy Praises" #20 in red hymnal

#366 "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me"

#2282 "I'll Fly Away"

Prayer of Confession:

Eternal Lord, whose abundant Grace knows no limits of time or space, we give you thanks for the times when you have made yourself known to us and touched our lives. We confess to you that we are not so generous. We fit our acts of kindness into our schedules and we plan our works of mercy so as to not interfere with our plans for the day. We are not against doing good to those in need. We simply want to schedule them at our convenience. Forgive us, O Gracious Lord, for opportunities which we missed to be agents of your love and grace simply because we did not have the time. And remind us that You are timeless in the mercy which you pour out on us daily. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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This passage is rich! I mean really rich in irony and pathos and caustic truth. It is a simple story and that is one of the reason I really love it. Only Luke records this story, but that is not surprising because Luke the Physician would remember this woman who was afflicted with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years.

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

Wherever he found himself, Jesus made his way to the local synagogue on the Sabbath day... Saturday for us. Luke does not feel it is necessary for us to know which synagogue, what town or village he is in. It is enough to know that Jesus was a faithful child of God and went to the synagogue on the appointed day. Now the second thing the story tells us is that Jesus was teaching. For some reason, wherever he went, people gathered around and listened as Jesus expounded upon the Word of God. Now, get this picture in your minds: Jesus and his strange band of followers happens to be in a given village when the sun goes down on Friday evening. The Sabbath begins at sundown. The next day Jesus wanders over to the local synagogue and immediately draws a crowd. Meanwhile the religious leaders of that synagogue are loosing students. For, more than being a house of worship, the synagogue was a school where learned scholars would propound upon the holy scrolls. Some of these learned religious leaders could recite what Moses had said about the commandments which God gave at Sinai. And some of these religious leaders could recite from memory what earlier scholars have said about certain passages from Isaiah, or Jeremiah.

But the crowd had gathered around Jesus and his disciples. Untrained. Unscholarly. Uncouth! You can bet your bottom dollar that the hostility from the religious leaders was already at a boiling point.

And how did Jesus teach? Did he use powerpoint? Did he use grafts and pie charts? Did he have audiovisuals and overheads? Did he have a well prepared lecture that he used over and over again? You know, I was at a political rally a few weeks back and the candidate gave a wonderful speech. He hit every point that needed to be made and he had good down to earth examples of how his election would bring in the Kingdom. Well, about ten day later, I happened to be at another rally and the same speaker got up to present his case. And it was the same speech I had heard ten days earlier. I kid you not, the outline was the same. The talking points were the same. The examples were the same. This man had a canned presentation that he used everywhere he went. That is not teaching.

Jesus taught by opening up a conversation between himself and his listeners. Often times folks came to him with questions prepared. Master, which is the most important of all the laws of Moses? Teacher, should we pay taxes to Caesar? Jesus, if a man strikes you on the cheek, how many times must I forgive him?

I have wondered during my 43 years of ministry if I had enough nerve to not prepare a sermon and simply come down and stand between the pews and throw it open and ask you if you have any questions. You see, I'm sort of in the class with those religious leaders.

I'd get real upset if some vagrant off the street walked in just before the service and took over and you found him more in tune to God than me. You see, I'm supposed to be the one who is in tune with God.

So, Jesus found himself in the synagogue on the Sabbath and the crowds gathered around him and he was teaching them. When what should happen, a woman entered the synagogue and Jesus noticed her right away. She was all bent over. You've seen people like this, I know. I saw a woman just the other day out at WalMart. She was bent at the waist to where her upper torso was parallel to the ground. It looked so uncomfortable. She had to turn her head sideways to look at items on the shelves. I cannot even imagine what it is like. Emilie Townes, the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of African American Religion and Theology at Yale Divinity School describes this poor woman with these words.

***Over the years, she has become accustomed, if not resigned, to her long and serious illness, which is attributed to Satan. For eighteen years this unnamed woman must strain to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. For eighteen years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see with just a glance. She is used to this, and no one questions her fate.***

She is, in many ways, invisible. Even the religious leaders at the synagogue have become accustomed to seeing her all bent over and have relegated her to her fate. Perhaps, if they believe that Satan is the cause of her condition, they feel powerless to help her.

But when Jesus sees the woman he calls her over... she did not ask for help. One gets the idea that she is trying to slip quietly by the crowd gathered around Jesus. But when Jesus spies her he calls out to her to come near. Up to this moment she had moved freely in and out of the Synagogue without anyone taking special notice of her. Up to this moment she has been content with being an invisible one. Up to this moment she has simply come to the synagogue on the Sabbath, for no matter how much of a grip Satan has on her body, her soul and her spirit still acknowledge God. But now something unusual is happening. She is being summonsed. And obediently she responds, moving toward the outstretched hand of this homespun teacher. And the words she hears are liberating. Never in all her years has she heard such words. "Woman you are set free from your ailment."

No one had ever said that to her before. No one had ever exercised such power before. For 18 years she had been afflicted. Early on in her illness she had sought out healers and gone to the religious leaders. And all they wanted to know was what great sin she had committed to deserve such an affliction. Worse yet, they often asked what great sin her parents had committed to have a child possessed in this manner. So she stopped going and simply accepted her fate.

But immediately upon hearing those words and feeling the hand of Christ upon her something miraculous happened to her body. She stood up straight! And she immediately began to praise God.

Well, you can imagine the reaction of the crowd. Those close enough to have heard the words and witnessed the laying on of hands were dumbfounded. They sat there with their mouths gapped open. Some were turning to neighbors and questioning. Some were also lifting up their hands in praise. This kind of release from captivity does not go unheralded. Across the courtyard, the religious leaders hear the commotion. They see the woman standing upright. They hear her praising God. They see the jubilation in the crowds. Things are getting out of hand. It was OK for this homespun teacher to give some instruction to a few disciples, but this.... This was beyond acceptable. We could have an outbreak of The Holy Spirit here... we've got to snip this in the bud.

It reminds me of the story of the gentleman who wandered into a Presbyterian Worship Service one Sunday morning. He normally worshipped at a Pentecostal Church. Well the service hadn't gotten too far along when he heard the preacher say something and he yelled out "Amen, Preacher!" And everyone sort of turned in their pews to see who made the disruption. A little later on the Choir sang a wonderful Anthem and the man on the back pew, yelled out "Glory, Hallehula". Several of the Elders figited uneasily in their pews. When the sermon began the man heard something else that inspired him and he yelled out "Tell it, Preacher, Tell it!" At that one of the Elders got up quietly and moved to the back of the church and stood behind the visitor who was obviously in tune with the message the preacher was giving. Finally, the pastor hit a high note and the man shouted out, "That's right, tell it like it is. Amen, Preacher!" To which the elder behind him leaned over and quietly said. "We don't do that in this church." "But I got the Spirit" "Well," responded the Elder, "that might be true, but you didn't get him here."

This is a miracle story! Luke the physician must have loved this story. Undoubtedly he must have encountered folks with this abnormality. Today we would call it curvature of the spine, or sculloious, or degenerative spine disease. In those days they understood that The Devil had taken hold of the body. Luke did not have the advantage of an X-ray machine. Luke understood that even with all his medical training, there was nothing he could do for such a person. But the religious leaders at the Synagogue must have been beside themselves. What could they say? What could they do? For years.. 18 to be exact, they had been powerless in the face of Satan's attack on her body. And now along comes someone who can cure with touch of a hand and the words of release.

They made a spontaneous decision, and sent over the head of the synagogue to speak to the crowds. And the message he brought was totally out of sync with the miracle that had just been performed. It is as if this woman did not exist. There she stands upright and whole and all the chief of the synagogue could say to the crowds was:

**“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”**

Now here is one of the reasons I love this story. Jesus does not back down! He does not let the religious leaders intimidate the crowds. He jumps right in and counterattacks:

**You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?**

There is no special time to do the will of God. There are no holy times when God's Grace should not be administered to God's people. Any moment of the day or night is appropriate to pour God's Grace out on those who need it. The fire department does not say, We cannot come, we are having supper right now. The EMT does not say, we'll be there in about two hours, we're having a training class right now. The preacher does not say, How about coming back on Sunday morning and we'll talk about your problem, I'm writing my sermon right now. The neighbor gets out of his bed and hurries across the street at 2:00am when he gets a call that someone is having trouble.

Jesus sees right through the words of the Synagogue Leader and calls a spade a spade. You Hypocrites! You take care of your donkey and ox on the Sabbath, but you will not allow for the healing of this poor woman on the Sabbath. What kind of leader are you? How do we know that you have the ear of God when you have allowed this woman to suffer for 18 years and when she is cured, you object because it isn't the right time of the week.

How will outsiders know that we are God's people? By what we say? No! By what we do! And we must always be about our Father's business. Now, I have to make a confession to you. Just this week we opened our doors to the Methodist who were run out of their church by a break in a gas line. So we had them come down here on Tuesday for their woman's bible study, and to use the nursery. That was good! Any time, on the spur of the moment, the doors of this church are open to meet a need. But, as they were leaving, a man walked in. He looked destitute! He said he needed to get to Bedford and his car was out of gas. Could we help? Well, I gave the standard response: "We work through DAWN and we send our funds there so if he could get to DAWN by 12 noon, perhaps they could help. Then I looked at the clock. It said 11:55am. He had five minutes and he did not think he had gas enough to get there. But I held firm and he sauntered dejectedly out the door. I could see tears coming to his eyes. And I felt guilty. I don't know who he was. I didn't know his story. Did not inquire as to why he had to get to Bedford. I gave him my standard religious answer: We give through DAWN.

And I felt bad about it all afternoon. How much different am I than that Synagogue leader. Would it have hurt us to pull \$10. out of the petty cash and helped him out. I could have taken a few minutes and gone down to the gas station and paid for the gas for him. Did I miss the opportunity to share God's Grace with someone who needed it. Perhaps I'll never know. But what is \$10 in the face of the possibility that this man really needed help to get to Bedford. And what's worse, what will his opinion of the Church of Jesus Christ be, when at a moment of need, he was told that we have our procedures and we will not bend?

I recommend that the Session set up an Alms Fund of about \$100 dollars that will be kept in the office for such occasions. And Kelsy and Carolyn can be authorized to pay for gas or medicine or what have you, up to ten dollars a person. Some people come through our doors who already feel invisible to The Church. Could \$10 change that perception? At Broad Street Christian Church in Martinsville, VA we had a voucher system, whereby I or the secretary could hand someone a voucher for \$10 for gas or a meal. And those vouchers were redeemable at a gas station nearby and a restaurant nearby. I cannot remember a single time when someone came back a second time for help. It was used for transients who would not qualify at Grace Network (DAWN).

But, back to the scripture.

**When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.**

You see, there is the end of it all. Not so much that Jesus' opponents were put to shame, but that the crowd was rejoicing at the wonderful things which Jesus did. When the wonderful sermons have ceased and the beautiful music has become a fuzzy echo within these walls, the things that people will remember about Altavista Presbyterian Church is the wonderful things we do in the name of Jesus Christ. These works of grace are not the means to our salvation. They are the response we give to God's Grace in our lives. They are the works which flow from the Good News of God's Grace alive in our lives. And my friends, there are no time restrictions on that Grace. Amen.

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