

This healing story appears only in Luke's gospel, and it gets right to the heart of Jesus' ministry.

Remember how Jesus announced his mission – also on a sabbath in a synagogue? Reading from the words of Isaiah, he said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” This is his manifesto, if you like, and he casts it in terms of liberation. There is hardly an episode in Luke's gospel that does not point back in some way to this proclamation.

In today's story, the theme of liberation echoes with special force. Luke gives us a vivid picture of the woman's condition. Suffering from an illness for eighteen long years, she is bent over almost double, “quite unable to stand up straight”. The challenges to her well-being are many: chronic neck and back pain (and anyone who lives with pain knows how it just wears you down), difficulty breathing due to compression of her lungs, heart problems from inflammation, and quite probably feelings of frustration, vulnerability and isolation. Her view is limited to the ground in front of her. She cannot look anyone in the eye, and they cannot reciprocate. She sees only their feet, and they see only her bent back and the top of her head. She is oppressed physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Jesus casts her healing as liberation. She is set free from her ailment and released from her long bondage. The leader of the synagogue, in his officious way, scolds the woman, and by extension anyone else who might come seeking healing that day, because it is the sabbath. I haven't been to the Rainbow Stage production of “The Wizard of Oz”, but this reminds me of the reception Dorothy and her friends get when they reach the Emerald City: “You can't see the Wizard today. Come back tomorrow!”

Did you know there are two versions of the sabbath law in the Old Testament? Both contain the injunction against working on the sabbath, but with different rationales. We're probably more familiar with the commandment linking the sabbath with the seventh day of creation. And so the commandment as recorded in the book of Exodus says, “Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work...For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.” (Exodus 20:8-11)

The sabbath teaching that Jesus uses to justify his healing, though, is found in Deuteronomy. It starts with the same words: “Six days you shall labour 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...so that your male and female slave may rest as well as

you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). In Jesus’ view, the sabbath law commemorates and celebrates Israel’s liberation. Therefore it ought to be a day for enacting, not inhibiting, the liberation of Israelites in the present. Indeed, given the realities of providing water for thirsty livestock (so that they too may enjoy their day of rest), it is surely appropriate to heal a suffering daughter of Abraham on the sabbath.

Note that Jesus does not in any way abolish the sabbath commandment. Rather, he aims to follow it faithfully. In the commandments, “work” is not defined. Jesus enters an ongoing debate about how to interpret the sabbath law and just what kinds of work are allowed and prohibited. The lists of prohibited work in various rabbinic writings do not include healing. The authorities agreed that life-saving intervention was allowed but were divided on whether healing of non-life-threatening conditions, such as the woman in this story suffered, were permissible. Jesus locates himself on the less-stringent end of the spectrum of opinion.

But this is more than a debate about scriptural interpretation. Jesus gives the woman’s healing cosmic significance. She has been bound by Satan – in other words, her condition violates God’s will for wholeness (and it is not her fault!). Her healing is an instance of God’s reign breaking into the world. This is all about the kingdom. If you read just beyond the ending of today’s story, you will see that Luke goes on to say, “He said therefore, ‘What is the kingdom of God like?’” (Luke 13:17). It is like a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree, or like grains of yeast that leaven a batch of dough. Jesus lays his hands on the woman, and she immediately straightens up and begins praising God. Something small and seemingly insignificant becomes, with God’s love and transforming power, an instrument that furthers the reign of God.

Jesus takes notice of what others might think insignificant, like mustard seeds and bent over women. He sees what others miss. He doesn’t take this woman aside for a private healing; he lays his hands on her in full view of the congregation. And for the first time in eighteen years, she praises God face to face with the other worshippers. Her fellow worshippers now see her differently too. They have a new perspective on their neighbour, so that community is also restored and “the entire crowd was rejoicing in all that he (Jesus) was doing” (Luke 13:17).

This story challenges all who have settled into narrow interpretations of scripture or ungenerous theological positions. Jesus’s mission cannot wait for a more “suitable” day. Jesus says the woman “ought” to be healed on the sabbath. What better day to set someone free from bondage to a debilitating reality? One online commentator I consult regularly suggests a title for today’s sermon might be “Well, then when?” Another commentator suggested “Best. Sabbath. Ever.”

The synagogue leader would have put barricades around God's grace. Jesus's answer is that God wants people to be made whole. Now. Not sometime in the future, or, heaven forbid, in a next life in another realm. Now. Today, we as disciples and the church itself are being called to stand with those who are in any way oppressed:

- those who have experienced sexual violence and its denial (especially in the church),
- those who live with the effects of racism, homophobia, sexism, or ageism
- those who live with the degradation of poverty that robs them of dignity
- those who live with addictions
- those who experience the intergenerational trauma of residential schools and the child welfare system.

We are called to see as God sees, to notice what seem to be insignificant things and people. Especially we are being called to work actively for healing and reconciliation between Indigenous and settler peoples. We are being called to work in partnership with the developing Indigenous church within the Anglican Church of Canada. It is a matter of helping people stand upright in dignity, find liberation from debilitating trauma (that is not their fault!), and rejoice together in the love, mercy, and power that restores God's children to wholeness and fulness of life.

This passage calls us to ask as individuals and as church, how and when have we participated in God's work and helped healing be possible? How and when have we erected barriers to God's work and thwarted that healing? We often do so for what seem to us like very good, holy reasons. But what is correct is not always right. Time and again, the gospel makes clear that grace takes precedence. As Jesus says elsewhere, "the sabbath is made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath." Or, as our Collect for today puts it, "All our doings without love are worth nothing." Amen.