

Sermon - August 21st, 2022

Rev Judy Steers

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "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?" 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 13:10-17

So there was Jesus, teaching in a synagogue – likely in a small town. A woman is there and she is probably well known to the people around her. She may have been known as ‘the bent over woman’ to everyone in the community. In this version of the story, she doesn’t even ask to be healed – Jesus sees here, recognizes her need, and heals her. Many of Jesus’ miraculous healings happen in private, or with very few people watching. Many of them Jesus admonished the person who was healed to not tell anyone. Some of them are very public acts – like the story of the paralysed man who was let down on a stretcher through the roof of the house by his friends, because the crowds were too big to get in. Or the woman who touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak in a crowd, and Jesus makes her healing very public by naming what happened and who had been healed. This moment too is public – not to draw attention to the person who was healed so much as to call out the person in authority who, well, should have known better than to criticize.

It’s clear throughout the Gospels that the religious leaders of the synagogue were increasingly annoyed by Jesus’ presence and teaching. Jesus was interfering with their authority and status. Jesus points out and rebukes their hypocrisy and lack of compassion and, as the gospel reads, puts his opponents to shame. By his words and actions he was pushing back against oppression and social marginalization. By means of healing, he removed the obstacles to exclusion.

Simply, Jesus is demonstrating that he operates from a deeper call – deeper than the perception of religious laws, deeper than the traditions of the community, deeper than the social conventions or levels of status. Deeper even than the hardness of heart of others. Jesus demonstrates – directly and simply – that compassion is the basis of everything he does. Sure - he points out the hypocrisy of an authority figure, and earns great popularity among the common people, but more than that, he instinctive response to the situation is to act with love, and act with compassion. In essence he is repeating, by his actions, that there is no law stronger than the need to show compassion, or offer love.

It reminds me of two stories:

The first was something I witnessed in my neighbourhood years ago, in a snowy winter.

In my neighbourhood, close to the university, most of the street parking has a 2 hour limit. On my street, and the one that T-junctions onto it, there is no limit and so of course there are lots of students and university staff who park there during the day – most of the neighbours have no issue

with this. We have all been students trying to stretch a dollar, and had our own experiences of not being able to afford on-campus parking.

There was one car, one evening on the perpendicular street. It was there overnight for some reason, which was not typical. Snow had fallen, the car was still there the next morning. It wasn't an expensive car – likely a student car by the looks of it – it was an older but, not a 'junker'. The car was parked, legally, in front of a house on the road. An older guy came out and started to clear his driveway with a snowblower. I watched as he pointed the nozzle of the snowblower directly at the parked car, and proceeded to half bury it in thrown snow. Why? Not sure. To prove a point? As a way of saying "you can't park here and I'm going to make a point of telling you that"? Either way, he had decided to be his own parking enforcement and half bury the car in snow.

I saw all this unfold from my driveway up the road where I was shovelling snow. Thinking 'that's a little unfair – you have no idea why the person left his car there – maybe it broke down, maybe they didn't want to drive under the influence, maybe...there's all kinds of possibilities.

Someone walked down the road. Didn't say anything to the guy with the snowblower, who had gone back to blowing out the rest of his walkway. The person simply started shovelling out the car that had snowblower piles all over it. Didn't yell at the snowblower guy. Just dug out the car, so that whoever the car owner was wouldn't come back to a car covered in frozen snow and unable to move. Did all that in full view of the guy with the snowblower, then walked away. I wondered how the snowblower guy felt. Angry that he had been shamed by the neighbour? Sheepish that his indignation had made him intentionally do harm to someone else? Resentful? Repentant? I know I have been both of the people in other situations – the person with the metaphorical snowblower exacting indignant revenge on someone who was apparently 'breaking the rules', and also the person with the shovel, undoing the damage of others, or trying to bring healing. I have been the former person too often for comfort.

The other story about showing love is also connected to the Sabbath, and my friends Lloyd, and Florence, or Flo as everyone called her.

A long time ago I was part of a chapel community on a military base in PEI – it was an H-shaped building: Catholic chapel on one side, Protestant on the other. The Protestant Chapel varied in liturgy and leadership, depending on who was the chaplain, whether a Baptist pastor, United minister, or Anglican priest among others.

Flo was the wife of the Baptist pastor. They were an older couple, near retirement. Flo was raised in a rural Baptist family in the 1920's.

Lloyd and Flo were next door neighbours. Lloyd and his family also attended chapel on Sunday mornings.

Late on Sunday afternoons, Lloyd would get out his mower and mow his large back lawn. Flo would be sitting at her kitchen table, watching, getting herself into quite a knot. Flo was raised, you see, that you didn't do any work on Sunday, and watching Lloyd mow his lawn bothered her. A lot.

One day she was outside when Lloyd went to his shed, and worked up the nerve to talk to him. 'I can't help it', she apologized, 'it was just the way I was raised and just makes me all upset when you mow your lawn on a Sunday'. For Lloyd, who worked hard all week at an office, mowing the lawn didn't seem like work to him, but a chore, and in his Christian family growing up, weekends were for family chores. Flo just didn't see it that way.

It was Lloyd in fact who related this story a few months later to me. In response to Flo's bluster, he could have just said 'it's none of your business'. He could have said "well, times change Flo", or "It's not a problem for me" and done it anyway. He could have kept doing it, just to spite her and goodness knows there are some folks in this world who might do that.

Instead, he told me "So, you know what I did? I started mowing my lawn on Thursday. It didn't really matter when I did it, for me it wasn't an issue. But, it was for Flo."

Lloyd wasn't trying to prove a point, he just decided to act with love, and with a heart of compassion. Lloyd decided that to *not* work on the Sabbath was the best way to show love and compassion for his neighbour. I heard that story 40 years ago, and I'm still moved by it.

Many of you have commented that you particularly like the words of blessing that I often say at the end of the service. I think these words – which include a quote from Swiss philosopher Henri-Frederic Amiel, who died in 1881 – summarize the intent of today's Gospel. *Be swift to love, make haste to be kind.* There are lots of opportunities to point out the flaws and failings of our fellow human beings, or be a stickler for 'that's not the right way to do that!'. But we choose a different and perhaps uncommon path, to make loving-kindness the basis of all that we do. Whatever oppression we bear that bends us over, we have the capacity to help each other to unbend from our burdens, and heal one another with compassion.

*Life is short,
And we do not have much time
to gladden the hearts of those
who travel the way with us.
So... be swift to love,
and make haste to be kind.
And the blessing of God,
who made us,
who loves us,
and who travels with us
be with you now and always.*

AMEN