

“Do The Most Loving Thing”

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Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Luke 13:10-17

She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her,

“Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.”

Luke 13:11^b-12

Let us pray... O God,

Thank you for the help we have received in times of difficulty.

Help us to recognize when we can help others in their need.

Inspire us to show forth your love and forgiveness by doing the most loving thing when we can.

Amen

Jesus was a ‘feminist’ – does that sound odd?

Feminism may not have originated with Christianity,

but the advocacy of women is evident in the Bible stories about Jesus.

In today’s story from Luke, Jesus healed a woman with a severe back deformity, despite taboos against working on the Sabbath – even to help someone.

In the Gospel of John, we learn that his disciples were not surprised to find him talking with a woman of Samaria.

This was despite social taboos against casual encounters between the sexes – let alone Galilean Jews fraternizing with Samaritans.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus healed a woman from a menstrual condition that had excluded her from participating in religious activities, and then Jesus encouraged her to speak publicly about her healing – another flaunting of social convention.

In John, he defended a woman caught in adultery and though he was sitting down as her accusers made their case,

Jesus stood up after they had been discredited and dispersed.

He stood up as if to specifically make a point

to speak to this woman standing before him, eye to eye, at the same level as a person with dignity deserving respect.

Like our Gospel lesson today, Jesus encouraged women to stand up for themselves.

We can find the same theme woven into the Hebrew Scriptures about Sarah, Hagar, Miriam, Esther, and Ruth.

The advocacy of women is certainly a core value of progressive Christianity, rooted in justice and increasingly necessary as a factor for world peace.

This imperative for women’s liberation is not limited to Christianity – though Christianity has certainly aided women’s liberation even despite opposition from within the traditional Church.

Malala Yousafzai, for example, is a teenage Muslim girl who suffered an assassination attempt because she stood up – and is still standing up for the rights of young women to get an education in Afghanistan.

Willard, p. 2

The advocacy of women is not going away – and stands as the principle challenge to religious fundamentalism in a variety of cultures.

Just like it says in our own Declaration of Independence as Americans, the struggle for women's rights is derivative of that universal and 'inalienable right' for all people in their 'pursuit of happiness'.

Other struggles for human rights are connected –
like the ongoing battle against human slavery
as well as the fight for the civil rights of all people –
like having the right to choose a life partner.

This drive for freedom is not going away and it is part of the Christian mission to make God known through the saving words & deeds of Christ Jesus.

We are living through a time of worldwide transformation –
whether we are talking about climate change of the environment,
or the climate change needed for the culture of violence,
or for whichever way the wind is blowing on Wall Street.

What looks like social disintegration can yet be the blossoming of a Beloved Community founded on an ethic of rational-lovingkindness.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus was openly criticized for helping a woman with a debilitating spinal condition.

A similar story found in the 2nd Chapter of Mark, has Jesus again in a synagogue and healing a person with a deformed hand.

He is met with silent contempt this time for doing work on the Sabbath – in both situations, this 'work' involved healing fellow human beings.

Jesus challenges us to look at our traditions – and our laws, asking,
"Is it better to do good or to do evil? To save a life or take one?"

The congregation of the synagogue where Jesus healed the person's hand, sat in silent contempt,

while the congregation of the synagogue where he healed the woman had a different reaction –

They approved of what Jesus said and did,
putting the religious authorities to shame as 'hypocrites'.

Jesus said,

*"And ought not this woman,
a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years,
be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" [Luke 13:16]*

What he is saying is that healing, helping, loving others on the Sabbath day is the best way to honor this God who loves and heals and helps humankind.

To care about others, doing the most loving in a given situation, is always the right thing.

Willard, p.3

This is not anything new – for it is the law of the human heart,
the emerging ‘love ethic’ that has been with us all along.

It is the Golden Rule that can be found in all of the great prophetic traditions,
and that can include science as we realize that

what we do – or neglect to do for our environment,
then we are helping or neglecting ourselves at the same time.

Our unique role as Christians is to be a witness to this truth
as it has been revealed about God’s love for us through Jesus of Nazareth,
and that we are to imitate Christ by doing the most loving thing
just as he did even in defiance of oppressive circumstances.

As we recognize and acknowledge those times when we have been freed
from the bondage of illness, or debt, or abuse, or even the fear of death,
our response out of gratitude ought to be
to help others as co-workers with Jesus the Liberator.

The occasion for that can be found daily in our own lives
as well as those occasions when we can help in the wider community –
especially, as we recognize injustices against groups of people
because of who they are as vulnerable and convenient scapegoats.

In the process of being co-workers with God to do the most loving thing
in imitation of Christ, then we are keeping our hearts open and supple,
unhindered by the cholesterol of greed, fear, and hatred.

Jesus warned his disciples there would be times ahead of a festering lawlessness
when love would be poisoned in many people’s hearts,
but those whose love endures will be saved.

When we get some distance on times of personal distress and community crisis,
then we can join along with those ancient children of Israel
who gave thanks to God by sharing their first harvest...

The Lord heard our call.

God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression.

*The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
with awesome power, and with signs and wonders.*

*[God] brought us to this place and gave us this land—
a land full of milk and honey.*

*So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground
that you, Lord, have given me.”*

[Deuteronomy 26:7^b-10]

Willard, p. 4

An example of love expressed as a gracious response to Jesus for some reason
can be found in the Gospel of Mark.

When Jesus was invited for dinner at the house of a Pharisee,
a woman enters unannounced and proceeds to anoint Jesus' head
with an expensive perfume.

We don't know who this was or why she did what she did –
she could've been the Samaritan woman, or the woman caught in adultery,
or Mary Magdalene, or even the woman with the deformed spine.

Now, even though some of those dinner guests were offended by her gesture –
not to mention that the Gospel writer neglected her identity,
yet Jesus acknowledged the gift and generosity
of this unnamed woman, saying,
“...wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world,
what she has done will be told in memory of her”, [Mark 14:9^b]
for two days later, he would go to the cross...

Let us remember that just as violence begets more violence,
so does loving-kindness beget more loving-kindness,
Friends, we can always do the right thing, by doing the most loving thing.

Amen

*Our scripture lesson today from Deuteronomy 26:1-11,
is a reminder to the people of God for the help they have received
just as they had been in the past,
and that they should give thanks and celebrate...*

- [1] Once you have entered the land
the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance,
and you take possession of it and are settled there,
[2] take some of the early produce of the fertile ground
that you have harvested from the land the Lord your God is giving you,
and put it in a basket.
Then go to the location the Lord your God selects for his name to reside.
- [3] Go to the priest who is in office at that time and say to him:
“I am declaring right now before the Lord my God that I have indeed arrived
in the land the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.”
- [4] The priest will then take the basket from you
and place it before the Lord your God’s altar.
- [5] Then you should solemnly state before the Lord your God:
“My father was a starving Aramean. He went down to Egypt,
living as an immigrant there with few family members,
but that is where he became a great nation, mighty and numerous.
- [6] The Egyptians treated us terribly,
oppressing us and forcing hard labor on us.
- [7] So we cried out for help to the Lord, our ancestors’ God.
The Lord heard our call.
God saw our misery, our trouble, and our oppression.
- [8] The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand
and an outstretched arm, with awesome power,
and with signs and wonders.
- [9] He brought us to this place and gave us this land—
a land full of milk and honey.
- [10] So now I am bringing the early produce of the fertile ground
that you, Lord, have given me.”
Set the produce before the Lord your God,
bowing down before the Lord your God.
- [11] Then celebrate all the good things the Lord your God has done
for you and your family—each one of you
along with the Levites and the immigrants who are among you.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Luke 13:10-17

[10] Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

[11] And there was a woman

who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years;
she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.

[12] And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her,

“Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.”

[13] And he laid his hands upon her,

and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.

[14] But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant

because Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the people,

“There are six days on which work ought to be done;

come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day.”

[15] Then the Lord answered him,

“You hypocrites!

Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger,
and lead it away to water it?

[16] And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham

whom Satan bound for eighteen years,

be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?”

[17] As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame;

and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.