

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Set Free to Stand Tall

Luke 13:10-17

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In the center of Luke's gospel is a beautiful story we have heard today of an encounter between Jesus and a woman who "had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years." Because of it, she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself up." By the end of the story she is set free, and with her healing, the good news of Christ is experienced in the world.

There's quite a bit at this heart of this story that is also at the heart of our worship this morning and every Sunday morning at DaySpring. And as we transition into a new fall rhythm with construction going on and begin all the fall things with new friends and new opportunities, it seems as important than ever to listen to the heartbeat of worship and our life together in Christ.

At the heart of this story and ours is something that seems so plain it's not worth mentioning except that is the ground from which everything else comes to life and not to be taken for granted. The people are gathered to worship on a Sabbath day. And so we are gathered here to worship. I don't take for granted that you are here. Some of you had to lasso an octopus of a toddler into the car to be here. Others had to tame the beast of social anxiety to get out of the car and walk into a room where you might not know anyone. But you're here. You made it to the gathering for worship. This is beautiful.

The tradition of Sabbath was a day of rest each week with worship at the heart of it, a day devoted to God and for renewal. Today, this practice can be completely and utterly ignored. We can go about our lives as if every day is the same, and there is no rhythm to it. Or, on the other hand, we can experience and insist upon Sabbath rest as a somber duty to be performed strictly, to honor the sabbath and keep it holy by doing nothing that brings joy or pleasure or fun--which says something about what you think holiness is and probably how you experience God.

DaySpring's approach to Sunday is to enter the day of worship with reverence and delight. More than just performing a duty, we are coming to be in the presence of God. And we need it. We need it desperately. Whether our daily lives are in a job situation where we can barely hang on to our faith or integrity, or whether we are neck-deep in service to others in a non-profit, surrounded by people of faith, either way and every other way, we need worship to be renewing for our souls. We've found that here, in silence and reverence; hymns and contemplative choruses seep into the broken places and the hidden places. We've discovered that we don't get bored when we come to the Table more often rather than less often and enact the sign of Christ's communion with his people—his death, burial, resurrection, and oneness of his body with his people in the world. We need one another and to say out loud what we believe- in the Creeds that make us and to let the Spirit have free range for God's good work within us. Stone and windows. Song and silence. Scripture and prayer. Word and Table.

In the story we read this morning, Jesus is most likely teaching from scripture assigned for that day to be read. We, too, follow a pattern of scripture readings that guide us, along with churches all over the world, every Sunday of the year. The Lectionary, our guide, proposes scripture readings for each Sunday: a gospel, a psalm, a letter in the New Testament, and a reading from the Old Testament. We don't always read every lesson every Sunday, but you get the idea. The Sunday readings are complemented by daily readings. If you followed the daily lectionary and the Sunday readings each week, you would be a person immersed in the scriptures. Sunday readings are an invitation to a life immersed in God's Word. We link a pdf of the daily readings in our weekly newsletter.

Because we follow the lectionary, on some Sundays we hear favorite familiar stories, like this gospel reading is for you—this reading of a woman who was bent over and healed. Others are harder to hear. Last week, we read Jesus talking about the strife that would come to families because of the gospel. It hits home because some of us know that pain. In a few weeks from now, we'll hear about taking up your cross to follow him, and later, about a rich man who paid no attention to neighbors in need until the tables were turned on him in the afterlife. When we read the prophets, we hear over and over again God's thundering word against idolatry, greed, and injustice toward the poor. It's not always easy to hear; the scripture doesn't always tickle the ears or warm the heart. Some are pretty tough. But it's good for us. Sometimes a little sandpaper is good for the soul. Sometimes, too, is the piercing of the heart. In last week's prophet reading, God says, "Is not my word fire and like a hammer that breaks rocks in pieces?" So we learn to thank God for the hammer that breaks the rocks within us into pieces and sets us free.

We come to sacred space on Sundays to be in the presence of something much bigger than we are and to take part in it. This, too, is good for the soul. It is a salve and a delight. This is the heart of Sunday worship—the delight of God, delight in God, and remembering God delights in you and who you are becoming. In the story from today, is it possible this is the only thing that kept this poor woman going week after week, year after year, a weekly assurance that she—even she—is part of something good, and that she is loved, even in her suffering.

The woman is dis-abled, unable to stand for years and years. Until this day. At the heart of worship is, we pray and we hope, a transformative encounter with Christ. The written, read, and proclaimed word is the path to the Living Word, Jesus, the Word of God, who took flesh and walked among us. He walked among the religious leaders who couldn't get out of their own way to see God's grace unleashed among them, even in the woman who is right there in front of them. He walked among the soldiers and the rulers who would eventually take his life on a cross. He walked among the crowds who followed him and cheered him, until they didn't. He walked closely with his closest friends, his disciples, men and women, who loved him. And he, the Word of God made flesh, walked with those who could barely take another step on their own. He is in the synagogue. It is the day of worship. He is teaching. And behold, she appears.

St. Augustine suggests that read analogically she symbolizes all humanity; she is all of us before Christ. "The whole human race is like this woman," he said, "bent over and bowed down to the ground." If that's true, then we all, in some way, need the same kind of liberation. So CS Lewis in his novel *Out of the Silent Planet* describes a whole population

as “bent by The Bent One,” who, it was said, “left you this way because a bent [one] can do more evil than a broken one.”

This is not to cast judgment on the woman in the story for some kind of malicious sin that has earned her affliction. Nowhere in the story is she anything other than oppressed by forces bigger than she is. Those forces unleashed in the world can be in a spiritual realm and can also be manifested in structures and cultures and judgments and conflicts. There are legions of reasons why a person may have the world so heavy on their shoulders they can hardly stand, and they can hardly stand themselves.

I got sucked into a troubling little video recently. It was dash cam of a police chase of a speeding car down an Arkansas highway. It went on and on. I couldn't stop watching. (Don't judge me.) The speeding car changed lanes, he exited and entered the highway, he pulled onto one of those little crossovers and wheeled around to go the other direction, all the while the police cruiser was trying to stay on his tail. I thought they'd lost him, but then the police car turns and into the view of the dash cam, on an exit ramp his wrecked car comes into view. He emerged unhurt, hands on his head, was immediately cuffed, shoved into the back of the police car. The whole time he is screaming something. I couldn't tell what he was yelling at first, but then it became clear. He was screaming, not at the police office, but somewhere into the void, “What's wrong with me? Why did I do that? I was so scared. What's wrong with me? Why?” Into the back of the police care, he's banging his head on the back of the seat in front of him. This guy has stayed with me, this image of this guy, who could've killed people. No excuses. But this wasn't a cold, calculating escape artist like in the movies. This was a scared, ashamed, guilty, young man whose life had gone desperately off the rails. “What's wrong with me?” he's yelling into the void.

As a sign of all humanity, the woman's bentness is a sign of the need for healing we all bear for that which we recognize is wrong with us, and we so desire that it be made right. In this story, what Jesus offers her isn't judgement, and it's not just a therapeutic assurance that she's okay; it is liberation.

Jesus sees her and does not judge her. He sees her, she who had been overlooked, suffering pain and indignity of her condition for years. She who had been likely deemed worthless, and useless. She who was unable to look anyone else in the eye, He sees her, not as an interruption to the delight and reverence of God on the day of worship, but as its purpose. This is for everyone. The arms of God are wide enough for us all. The power of God is strong enough for everything we bring before him that is beaten down, oppressed, resistant, defiant. God is powerful to save, to heal, to set us free. When Jesus first announced his mission early in Luke, he described it in terms of liberation and flourishing, “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 favor.” Every page of Luke points back to the Messianic manifesto. Jesus insists the woman be *set free*, released from her bond. He sees her; speaks words of freedom; he touches her. And she stands tall. This, too, is the heartbeat of worship.

DaySpringers have come over the years in need of healing, often from some deep wounds—some caused by church, some from family, some from just being alive, and

they've come for liberation—from addictions and habits and patterns, and grief, and the question, “Why? Why do I do what I don't want to do?” The truth is neither healing nor liberation are ultimately ours to give. Most days, the best we can do is just get out of the way—get out of the way of the possibility that the door will open to an encounter with the power of the living God. This is our prayer: that in the mystery of God's goodness, the door will swing wide, and we walk across the threshold into God's arms.

I was at the Baylor church fair yesterday, meeting Baylor freshmen and telling them about DaySpring. It was fun. Especially because I brought my dog and dressed him in a DaySpring church shirt. He was our mascot. So he and I would make laps around the fair meeting people. I got to overhear because of that, small snippets of conversations of other church representatives with freshmen, most of whom are brand new to Waco and had no idea there could be that many churches in one city. One in particular caught my ear. A middle-aged man whose face and body bore the marks of what was plainly some hard living, and he was, by all accounts an unlikely ambassador to bright eyed 18-year-old co-eds. I don't know if they could appreciate the power of what he said, but I was walking by when he said it, and it stopped me in my tracks. Most of the rest of us were sort of advertising; he was testifying. I heard him say to some student, “If you need a place to go, this church saved my life.” And for all the flyers and the promotions of who has what attractive program and which worship style is attractive to which student, in the middle of all of that—which is life-giving and important—but in the middle of all of that was the whole purpose of all of it. I didn't even catch which church it was, and I'm glad for it. Because this morning, I can pray that that story to be repeated in every single one of them because Christ is present in every one of them. And I know that story is here, too, because I've heard it over and over and over again.

This is the heart of our worship. It is like... did you ever go to a children's museum, and you put your hand on the metal ball and it makes you hair stand on end. It's called a Van de Graaff Generator, for what it's worth. Worship is kind of like that, but instead of putting your hand on an orb to channel a little static electricity, you reach out to try to grab lightning. But really, in stead of that, in worship you open your hand and heart that the God of sacred fire may touch you in just the way that you need. Worship is the grace of intimacy, immediacy, and a prayer for renewal, for joy and delight, for conviction, for healing, and for freedom in Christ before whom we bend the knee and bow the head and cup the hands, and by grace, are free to stand tall, to praise God, and walk with him into whatever tomorrow may bring.

All in him, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light and whose grace is freely given to you on this day. Amen.