

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Come, Expecting
Luke 13.10-17
August 21, 2022

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus is doing a thing he apparently did regularly: teaching in one of the synagogues, the local meeting houses for Jewish worship, on the sabbath, the day of the week set aside from work for rest and the worship of God. On the sabbath, a day when you weren't supposed to do a lot of things, it was permissible to teach in a synagogue. That's what he's doing, and everyone's happy. There's joy in the presence of the Lord. I feel that here, too.

Some of you have been around here a long time, and some are new to DaySpring, even new to Waco. This time of year is exciting, it feels like a fresh start with kids back in school and college campus buzzing, and the DaySpring ministries Chart filling-in, and all-church breakfast this morning, cinnamon roll fueled congregational singing. Today's a day of new beginnings. Thinking about beginnings, when DaySpring began those who were part of the founding group asked a simple but profound question: what do we need church to be? The answer was: a place of rest, a place of worship that is renewing, a place where everyone belongs and has their place. We're busy and pretty much exhausted from everything we're doing all week. We need church to be a place where our spirits are renewed when we come. About a decade later when this location became the home of this congregation, they named the road Renewal Way. Everyone who pulls down the drive is traveling the Renewal Way. The church's ministry begins and ends with worship to renew our spirits and our faith in Jesus. Jesus, in our story, is at worship with the community.

In the gospel story, then, a woman comes in. A spirit has crippled her for 18 years until she was bent over and unable to stand up straight. Let's save the modern era diagnosis speculation about osteoporosis or whatnot. Let's instead consider her— as an individual with her own suffering, and her role in the gospel as a symbol of the suffering and heavy-laden burdens of so many others, who are also bent over and unable to stand up straight, dragging themselves into the place of worship to meet Jesus.

And this is the question I want to ask, it's not really about her, though I have an image of her in my mind. It's not really about her; it's about you, if you'll permit me. You, bent over in spirit if not in shoulders, what weight are you carrying as you come into worship in this sanctuary on this Lord's Day? How heavy is the weight on your shoulders as you come to worship? How low are *you* bent? And what would it mean to meet Jesus here?

I wouldn't be surprised if, amongst the energy, nervousness, and excitement of this moment in the year, if you are not also carrying some heavy loads on your shoulders and on your heart. Some family conflict and heartache; long hours at work and endless decisions to be made; or a month that stretches farther than your dollars? Some anxiety? How are you doing? How are you

doing today? If you could stand up and share how you're doing, and tell the truth and know you would be heard and loved, what would you say?

One thing I want you to know is that this is a place where you can say and share how you're doing—how you're really doing—and tell the truth and you will be heard and loved. This is a community that creates space for each of us to encounter the living God who welcomes those who can stride in with ebullient confidence and those who are dragging their feet or their hearts or their faith to the altar. God invites you into the divine presence to hear and tell the truth, to sing and listen in silence, to love and be loved, and in all of this to be transformed. Some years after the founding of this church, this intention was put to music: *if your heart needs mending, come away. If your soul needs tending, come away.*

With our burdens and our excitements, here we have a moment to be still today, to set before the Lord all that is on our hearts. Our cares are yours, oh God. Our concerns are yours. Our prayers are yours. Our hopes are yours. Our plans are yours. Our confessions and regrets and griefs are yours. We are yours, and you are all in all. This is our prayer. In this excitement and with our burdens sometimes we need a place of quiet rest, near to the heart of God, to be centered and return to our center. When we still and quiet our hearts, we are able to hear God's Word to us and find that Word will change us.

Jesus was teaching God's Word in the synagogue. The Word of God read, studied, preached, prayed, and sung is at the heart of the renewal of our spirits. We come to hear and speak and open ourselves to God's living Word. As we see in Jeremiah's calling, God's Word has power, do not be mistaken. It has the power to call young Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations, to tear down what needs to be torn down, and to build up what needs to be built. And God's Word was powerful to overcome Jeremiah's protest, "but I am only a young boy, a youth." If some come to Jesus feel like they're bent over and burdened, others probably feel right now like they are young or inexperienced and have no idea what you are getting into. Yesterday I visited with several college freshmen who each said in their own ways, "My parents just left yesterday. I feel totally overwhelmed right now, like I've just been dropped into an alternate universe." Ya, that's kind of Waco. Welcome to town. They'll be ok, but they don't know it yet.

"Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a child" said Jeremiah. And the Divine reply comes, "Do not say, 'I am only a child;' my Word is in you." Those whom God calls in scripture always have a reasonable excuse for why they can't do something. And God just never really seems all that interested. Do not say I am only a child; do not say I am only a newcomer. Do not say I am only a woman in a man's world. Do not say I am only a poor person and can't do anything. You're not only anything. You are made in the image of God. You are called by God. God has put God's Spirit within you. You're not only anything, the hand of God is upon you. God is with you. God is in you. God's Word has power for you and through you. We encounter that divine power when we are in worship in the presence of the Word and the Table and the community of faith.

Our reading from Hebrews poses an important question: what do you think you're doing here when you come here—to worship God? What is it you think is happening? It's not only a human gathering. It's a divine encounter.

Years ago, someone who'd been observing our church's life said to me, "DaySpring is this quiet, contemplative church. You pray. You sit in silence. You are patient with big decisions. You keep things simple. You're not overly busy. You seem to care about each other." I said, "yeah, that sounds about right. What's on your mind?" He said, "Well, it seems to me, you're just the kind of church that will change the world." I didn't know what to make of that, but that conversation has rattled around in my mind over the years. Came back to me from time and time again as I served with our group at Gospel Café, and as I went with groups to El Salvador and Honduras and San Antonio. It's come back to me as I saw the Naomi House come to life. I don't know if we're going to change the world, but I know that there will be at least one asylum seeker feeling bent over and lost who is going to have their world changed. I've been thinking about the paradox of that: a church at prayer and worship is just the kind of church that can change the world. And that's not because of the church. That's because of worship; because of God.

When we come to worship, we do not come to merely a human-interest gathering or a group therapy session or a performative ritual. This is so much bigger than all of that. In the soaring words of Hebrews, when you come in the sanctuary to worship: you come to Mt. Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to innumerable angels in festal gathering, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God the judge of all and to the spirit of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. Worship is holy encounter with God. We are not pushed away by a God who demands to be kept at distance; we are beckoned in, inwards, deeper and deeper, higher and higher, truer and truer. Worship is an encounter with the living God who has come to us in Jesus Christ and beckons all people to come to him. We come with thanksgiving, by which we offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for God is a consuming fire.

What are you doing here? You are coming to be consumed by divine fire, to be transformed in the Word, to be welcomed as your true self before the God of truth, to be made whole. The words of a beloved blessing put it well:

May the Lord Bless you and keep you.

May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.

May God give you grace not to sell yourself short,

Grace to risk something big for something good,

Grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but love.

May God take your minds and think through them.

May God take your lips and speak through them.

May God take your hands and work through them.

May God take your hearts and set them on fire.

With such a blessing ringing in our ears and hearts, we prepare to come to the Lord's Table.

There's no giving of bread and wine in this story of Jesus in the synagogue with the woman bent over. But in a way it's a eucharist story because Jesus touches her and heals her. He places his hands on her, and she is set free. Once you notice this in Jesus and in the scripture, you can't help but see it everywhere: the touch of God accompanies the word of God. We see this most fully and clearly in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. God's Word is accompanied by physical manifestation. Also in Jeremiah: The Lord God put out his hand and touched my mouth. God touched Isaiah's lips with burning coals. At the last supper, Jesus took bread and broke it and gave it and washed their feet. After the resurrection, Thomas touched Jesus' side. The disciples at Emmaus knew the risen Christ when he broke bread. God's ministry of renewal and calling, the ministry of the living God is in the Word and in the touch.

We need touch, we need something tangible, material. Our faith is alive in all we think and say and feel, and embodied in our hands and feet. As Baptists, our faith is embodied in hugs and high fives and handshakes and breakfast casseroles, and in cleaning buildings and pulling weeds. When we are new Christians our faith is embodied in baptism, as we are submerged in the waters, immersed in grace.

And just about every week, we taste the goodness of the healing grace of God at the Table of our Lord. We come with open hands to receive the manifested, embodied, touch, the taste of God's healing grace. Far more than just a performative human ritual of remembrance, we encounter the living God in his body and in his blood, in this bread and in this wine. This is the place of encounter with the God who calls and convicts, who heals and sends, who renews our spirits and who meets us here. We need this. We who easily stride light on our feet, we who are bent low, we who don't know what tomorrow brings, we who come desperate for God. We need this.

So let us come to the Table now. Let us come to Jesus, bringing all that is within us. This is my prayer for us today and for all of our worship. May you meet God here, and may you receive the fullness of God's Grace and the power of God's word, that we may each say:

Bless the Lord my soul, and bless God's holy name.

