

Cedar Heights Community Presbyterian Church
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—“Set Free”
08/24/2025 (Combined service with St. Luke’s Episcopal)

Rev. Johnny Janssen

Old Testament Lesson—Psalm 71:1-6

In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you.

New Testament Lesson—Luke 13:10-17

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.

You know, my friends, I’m struck by just how elusive freedom is—how fleeting freedom is—*still* is, in our world. And I doubt I’m alone in thinking that.

It’s baffling to me—baffling that, despite all our modern, “civilized,” twenty-first century, advanced sensibilities, freedom continues to be out of reach for so many—an unrealized dream for too many.

I mean...Don’t you find it frustrating—maddening even—that despite our post-Enlightenment, technologically-rich, globalized understanding of the world—with the great benefit of historical hindsight and past atrocities, with all this...human beings just can’t get it together...

We can’t seem to stop keeping each other in bondage. In fact, we’re arguably getting better at this! Our modern-day chains are sneakier—insidious, more creative—many of them masquerading as good things and preventative measures. Oh, how innovative our bonds have become!

What’s more: Many of these are legalized—institutionalized—or have been in recent memory. I’m thinking, for example, of societal shackles like redlining, gerrymandering, blood covenants, food deserts, cash bail, mandatory minimums...Sadly, I could go on...

Yet, as awful as these cultural chains are, I don’t think we should be surprised at how commonplace they’ve become. After all, we live in a society where, far too often, the ends

justify the means—where chaos—where cruelty is the point. We perform moral gymnastics on a regular basis to curb our conscience.

We're consumed by consumerism—all too willing to exploit neighbor and nature to get what we want—oblivious to how our possessions possess us.

And Lord, have mercy do we go out of our way to accept lies as truth! And I get it. A comfortable, convenient lie we can just barely live with is sometimes preferable to the naked truth that breaks our hearts and makes it impossible to keep living as we are.

How long, O Lord? How long will we continue to protect such lies while the most vulnerable among us are stripped of their civil protections?

How long will we insist on dignifying the greed and policies of tyrants while the least privileged are treated without dignity—while those in greatest need are ignored, incarcerated, silenced, denied, deported, and dehumanized? How long, O Lord?

More and more these days, I find my spirit resonating with the words of the psalmist. Maybe you do too: *O Lord...In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me...Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.*

Am I right? Those words might as well've been written yesterday...

Just as timeless, perhaps, is our gospel lesson this morning from Luke—one of the various healing stories available to us in Scripture. And, in many ways, this story is quite typical of what we should expect when Jesus brings healing to those in need.

In other words, when Jesus performs these kinds of miracles, he's probably somewhere he "shouldn't" be. He's probably chatting it up with the "wrong" kind of people—breaking bread with "them." And he's almost certainly helping and healing those who don't "deserve" it—at least not according to the privileged, powerful, and self-righteous.

And if all that weren't egregious enough, he's got the nerve to treat the worst of the worst like *human beings*—assuring them that their biggest mistakes don't define them—not in his eyes and not in God's either. He isn't afraid to cross cultural boundaries and religious barriers if it means demonstrating God's love.

The gospel of Luke, as it turns out, is absolutely notorious for this—for emphasizing just how much God loves and reaches the poor and outcast—for showcasing Christ's ministry to the lowliest and least respected of society.

Of course, our text today is a case in point—practically emblematic of Luke and even (perhaps) Christ's ministry in microcosm.

Here, we have Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath—the day of rest. Nothing too exceptional or problematic about that. Of course, we aren't told exactly what he's teaching or the scroll he's reading.

We do know Jesus was fond of the psalms and the prophetic tradition, especially Isaiah. We also know his subject matter draws bitter contention elsewhere in Luke's gospel.

I should mention that Jesus's ministry started in Nazareth with proclaiming the prophetic legacy of liberation—with pronouncing freedom for the most vulnerable and downtrodden. Then and there, too, he's met with an angry outcry.

Here, it's Jesus's actions—it's the living out of those teachings—that get him into some good trouble. We're told a woman suddenly approaches him. She's desperate for help. She's been suffering from a debilitating chronic illness for eighteen long years.

Never mind the impropriety of a woman forcing her way to the front past the raised eyebrows of men—the synagogue leaders. Never mind the impurity she would've certainly acquired and retained through such disease. Never mind still the sinfulness those present

would've assumed she embodied by such obvious disability. Never mind all the things making the religious establishment scoff and shake their heads.

Eighteen years, my friends...Think about it: Eighteen years of pain and suffering and pitiable stares...Eighteen years of wrong assumptions and ostracism...Eighteen years of waiting and hoping against hope for some modicum of relief and respite.

I imagine all of those emotions rushing around and boiling over as she fumbles awkwardly past everyone she has to in order to reach Jesus—bent over and without a clear view of where she's stepping.

But notice how Jesus responds quickly and decisively—almost reflexive in his compassion: *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.*

...didn't even have to think about it! The right thing to do was just that obvious. Christ had the means to help. There she was in need. And help was given right away. Imagine!

I have to imagine, also, that Jesus saw this as more than a person in need of healing and compassion. I think, for Christ, this was also a justice issue. For example: I wonder to what lengths (if any) this community had gone to alleviate her distress—to protect her dignity?

After all, he had already told another synagogue he came to liberate the captives and let the oppressed go free. Isn't theirs the God of Moses? Isn't theirs the God of Exodus?

Lord, have mercy! The Israelites had already known centuries of bondage in Egypt. Their leaders should realize the grievous injustice of spending even one more day in bondage than absolutely necessary. Doing so is dehumanizing and unfaithful to the God of Israel.

Eighteen years of delayed justice is far too long. She would be denied no more.

The response of the religious leaders speaks volumes about their sense of justice—wouldn't you say? Not only had a miracle been performed in their midst, but God had been praised because of it!

And despite these wonders and the glorifying of God, the leaders don't share in the woman's joy. They aren't humbled by God's power and mercy. Instead, what do they point out? The Sabbath was violated. The Sabbath day was disrespected, they say. That's what matters. Today was not the right day. This was not the right time.

Listen: I don't know about you, but I really hear some frustration and just a pinch of attitude when Jesus responds and points out their hypocrisy...

You know it takes some nerve to invoke the Sabbath day—the foundation for Jubilee—when all slaves would be released and all debts forgiven! The Sabbath day? Really?... the basis for nationwide liberation and the cornerstone of emancipation—Lord, it takes some *chutzpah* to invoke *that* day as to why this woman should remain in chains!

Can you hear the attitude in Christ's voice now?

Y'all have clearly disregarded Moses's legacy and our God's affinity for Exodus and liberation. Do I need to remind you she's also a daughter of Abraham? Will that afford her your compassion and respect? Will that give you pause to celebrate freedom when you see it?

Will that set a fire in you to strive for the Jubilee Moses calls for—to work for the liberation Isaiah proclaims and God demands?

Siblings in Christ: Make no mistake. I'm not here today to berate the synagogue leaders or the religious elite of Jesus's time. I don't think that's helpful. In fact, I think it's harmful when that becomes our focus.

However, I do think it's important to not mince words when it comes to freedom—when it comes to God's desire to liberate those held captive by the ills of our world.

God *yearns* to break our chains—both chains that are forced upon us and those we impose on ourselves. Our Lord and Savior and Prophet, Jesus Christ, came to set us free!

So, although I won't stand here and rip the scribes and Pharisees a new one, I also refuse to sugarcoat Christ's consistent preference for the plight of the poor and outcast—in this case, a woman bound by chronic illness for nearly two decades.

Yes, of course, God's love is unconditional, universal, and impartial. That is certain. Yet, Scripture (especially Luke's gospel) is equally clear that Jesus is on the side of the oppressed—of those society has deemed unworthy, unclean, untouchable, and unlovable.

Consider this. Who does Jesus criticize time and again? It isn't the "least of these" or the lost. It isn't the lowly or the foreigner. It isn't the outcast or the refugee. And it sure ain't folks like this woman searching for hope and desperate for healing!

I'll ask again. Who does Jesus repeatedly criticize? It's those who keep the vulnerable down and in their place. It's those who profit off the chains of others. It's those with the power and means to help their neighbors but do nothing. It's those with the greatest privilege who use their privilege to serve only themselves. It's the self-righteous bullies and tyrants and those who refuse to recognize their own hypocrisy.

Siblings in Christ: We can't afford to withhold hard truths. Not today. The stakes are too high. Sometimes, speaking the truth in love means doing so without tact. So I'll be blunt: Don't be fooled by thinking Jesus is on the side of the oppressor. He's not. He's comforting the oppressed and protesting on their behalf.

As the God of Exodus took drastic measures to liberate the Hebrews from slavery, so Christ accepted drastic measures to liberate us from sin and death and every obstacle that gets in between us and our neighbor in need.

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment." We, too, have been set free for such a time as this. Though much healing and reconciling is left to be done in our world, we've been freed to do that work—called to bring good news to those still yearning to breathe free.

With every dividing wall torn down, we're left without excuse. What will we do with the freedom we've been granted? The example we have from Jesus is indisputable.

It must be to work alongside those demanding justice. It must be to affirm the image of God in everyone, but especially those the world neglects. And it must be to become Christ's hands and feet until every chain is broken and every oppressive law overturned.

And let's not pretend this is impossible, my friends!

No: This is the day that the Lord has made—our holy day when we realized anything was possible with God! So there is no better time to do what is right. There's no better day to bring healing and freedom to a weary world.

Amen.