

# Compassion Over Legalism

Luke 13:10-17    Isaiah 58:9b-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Let's play "**What if...**"

- *What if our understanding of the chief focus of God is not so much about being worshipped and obeyed, but more about love and caring concern for all people and for all creation?*
- *What if our understanding of God is not so much about power and authority, but more about restoration and healing, gracious generosity and giving, encouraging and renewing?*
- *What if, therefore, our understanding of commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, the institutional church, even the scriptures are subordinate to love, mercy, forgiveness, and compassion – for others and for oneself?*

As one who has always tried too hard to live life as a rule-follower, this is something I am trying hard to work on.

These understandings are all present in the Gospel of Luke's often-overlooked story of Jesus healing of a woman suffering from the oppression and burden of being bent over for a very long time, followed by the contentious discussion of the real purpose of observing the Sabbath and keeping it holy, as in separating it from the other days of the week.

**This is a story about compassion taking precedence over legalism. It is a story about grace – God's grace to us, and ultimately about our extending that grace to others, including to ourselves.** Here are a few important observations helpful in an interpretation of this story. The unnamed woman seems to have gone to the synagogue on that Sabbath day simply to worship God, perhaps because she knew Jesus would be teaching that day. We learn she has a crippling disease, forcing her to stoop over, thus keeping her focus on the ground, unable to look people in the eyes. **Social interaction, perhaps even ostracism, would have been part of her affliction. She was indeed a woman on the margins.** And she had this binding affliction for a very long time. The passage says 18 years.

It is important to notice that she does not approach Jesus, makes no request of him, and professes no faith in him. Rather, once Jesus sees her, it is he – representing God – who takes the initiative in the woman's restoration. It is Jesus who calls her to come over, pronouncing that she is set free from her affliction. Jesus lays his hands upon her and she is healed immediately, standing up straight and thanking God.

What Jesus has done for this woman is part of the fulfillment of his prophesied commission of releasing captives from the bonds of evil and affliction. **This was an act of radical grace. And it was more than a physical healing. The woman's status and dignity are also restored.** One biblical commentator writes, "The illness this woman had had meant the disruption and loss of social relationships, exclusion, and therefore loneliness.

What Jesus' action did was to reinstate her to legitimate membership in the community of Israel."

How can you and I relate to the woman in this story? Well, if we're being honest with ourselves, there is not one of us who can't identify either a binding physical, emotional, or spiritual affliction that doesn't need healing and wholeness in our lives.

**Reflect for a moment, then, upon what afflictions and burdens are manifest in your life. What binds you? What is causing you to be bent over? What is it for which you need to be set free?** The same questions can be asked of organized religion today, whether it be Christianity in general, or entire denominations, like the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), or individual communities of faith, including College Hill. What is binding us? What is it from which we need to be set free? Perhaps it is from old ideas, rituals, and traditions that at an earlier time were life bringing, but are no longer.

Let us not lose track, however, **that the person in this story experiencing liberation and wholeness is a woman**, given little regard in her culture simply because of her gender, let alone her condition. Teresa Berger, professor of liturgical studies at Yale Divinity School, reminds us:

In a world that continues to 'bend' women's lives, we must follow Jesus in claiming that the lives of women are sacred, and that women are invited to be healed and flourish in the presence of the Holy One. Would that Jesus' generous gift of freedom for a bent-over woman were visible in our time, and especially in our sanctuaries. And that women's voices of praise, born from God-given freedom, be heard around the world. Surely that would be good news for today.

Following the healing and restoration, the next segment in this story is the reaction by the leader of the synagogue, followed by Jesus' reaction to him. This leader, who is most likely meant to represent perhaps a vast segment of Jewish religious leadership in Jesus' day, will not allow this story to end with the praise of God. We are told that he is indignant, not at the healing, per se, but because Jesus "healed on the sabbath." That is the day of rest and intentional focus on God. **He sees his role as maintaining proper observance of the sabbath law rather than celebrating the restoration and release of the woman from her affliction. His concern is following tradition in a legalistic way. Some Christians today follow tradition so strictly that it seems to care more about following rules than caring about human need.** The synagogue leader comments, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." He is alluding to the sabbath requirement in the Ten Commandments to do no work on that day. He considered healing a person in need as work, not rest.

Challenged, Jesus responds with a critique of the synagogue leader's interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. Jesus answers his opponents out of their own law. It was perfectly legal to untie bound farm animals so that they could drink water. Jesus, after calling the leader a hypocrite, basically reasons, "If you can set free an animal from a stall and give it water on the sabbath day, then surely it is even more appropriate in the sight of God to set free this afflicted woman from her bondage and infirmity." Jesus uses a common tactic back then, inviting his opponents to **reason from the lesser to the greater. What they would do for an ox or a donkey wouldn't they do for a fellow human being**, a daughter of Abraham, no less?

**The core question is not whether to keep the sabbath, but rather how to keep it separate from the other days of the week. The sabbath's purpose, as Jesus sees it, is fulfilled not by forbidding acts of kindness and compassion, but by encouraging them.** It also shows what can happen when the spirit of the law is held submissive to the letter of the law. Or, as stated in the Gospel of Mark, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27).

Jesus teaches, by word and action, that the individual must always come before the system, defending the value and worth of the ordinary, individual person – without inflicting judgment or shame, something organized religion must learn to do better. Strangely enough, though, **this worship of systems commonly invades the Church.** Biblical commentator William Barclay wrote over 60 years ago, "There are many church people...who are more concerned with the method of church government than they are with the worship of God and the service of other people...**In the world and in the church, we are constantly in peril of loving systems more than we love God and more than we love each other.**"

Jesus counters with the greater necessity of helping set free others, including ourselves, from whatever is binding them and us. And, being intentional about it when the opportunity presents itself. In a poem posted this week by Steve Garnaas-Holmes, entitled "**How Jesus Teaches**", he reflects upon how Jesus approaches ministry, providing us with a guide to our own approach.

Watch what Jesus does:

He notices what hurts, and goes there.

He offers healing, unconditionally.

He heals not only a spine but a life.

He calls a woman supposedly cursed with illness

a "daughter of Abraham"—worthy, named, and belonging.

He values people over principles.

He opposes a status quo that justifies suffering.

He confronts those in power who use it for harm

(again, noticing the wound and going to it).

He doesn't break God's law: he interprets it more deeply:

as a law of liberation, not requirement or prohibition.

He invites us to see Sabbath, and God's law, and all of life in a new way.

He gives us permission—and a theology—

to live lives of love in the face of oppression,

regardless of rigid systems, and despite resistance,

to offer mercy and healing and love.

**What if you and I, and us together, choose grace over the law? What if we embody compassion over insisting on legalism, thus living into God's healing work in the world, in communities of faith, including ours, and in our homes?**

Amen.

Resources:

Teresa Berger, *Off the record: Luke 13:10-17*, christiancentury.org, 2004.

Bill Loader, *First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 11, Luke 13:10-17*,

<https://billloader.com/LkPentecost11Ord21.html>