

Proper 16 C, 2025

Isaiah 58:9b-14 Hebrews 12:18-29 Luke 13:10-17

Authors of fiction are often known for their use of language, for the way that they construct sentences and for their character development. The reason to read another book by the same author often has something to do with word choice, construction, plot. Those are the things that contribute to them becoming bestsellers. This morning, we are confronted with a text that utilizes language in just such a pattern. Teaching, Synagogue, Sabbath, these three words added together signal to the reader of Luke's gospel account that something extraordinary is about to take place.

Teaching happens when the disciples are with Jesus. They could be working, walking along, sharing a meal, or simply talking. Jesus teaches his followers so that they learn about kingdom life. They learn how to relate to one another. They learn how to pray. They learn about life through viewing the natural habitat. But this alone doesn't signal extraordinary.

Being at the synagogue is nothing extraordinary for a Jewish boy or girl, or for a young man or woman. Culturally there were lots of things that took place at the synagogue. It housed many aspects of communal life.

And as for the Sabbath, that occurs like clockwork. Every seven days when the sun sets, and a new day begins. Humanity is offered rest from the pace and fever and stress of life, prayers are said, thanksgiving is made. The community is together rejoicing in God's generous goodness. This I suppose is the most extraordinary one of the three as it stands alone. But when Luke links together; teaching, synagogue and Sabbath, extraordinary things happen.

Being crippled for 18 years is a painful thought. Simply working in the yard weeding the flower beds or in the house scrubbing the floors, or hanging out the washing, or sitting on the basement floor working on an art project, any of those leaves me stiff and sore. 18 years is a long time. I do not know how that woman managed, but there she is at the synagogue. There she is at the place where thanksgiving is made. There she is putting herself in the midst of communal life. There she is marking the end of one week, the beginning of the next. There she is seeking rest from the debilitating spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. Jesus, for whatever reason does not tolerate the sight. He calls to the woman bent with pain. "*Woman, you are set free from your ailment.*" Jesus doesn't ask her questions, doesn't consider her family or place of origin, doesn't connect the healing with the content of her prayer, or the amount of money she may have placed in the poor box. He simply recognized a need and acted appropriately with the pronouncement "*she is set free.*" He laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

It is Sunday morning. We are at church. There is teaching. We all come with something that cripples us. It may not be back pain from sitting on a basement floor, or too much time working in the flowers. It may be something less obvious to the person sitting next to us. But whatever is crippling us; its effects keep us from: living fully, loving fully, embracing life fully. God announces to us that we are "*set free.*" He announces that our sins are forgiven. That the wrongs we have done, thought about, contemplated, entered, and even the things that we didn't make time for are all forgiven. Some of us may think that we do not need to be made free because things are going along pretty well. We have things under control, or at least we convince

ourselves that things are heading in the right direction. But God in Christ Jesus knows what is crippling us and pronounces the Word that sets us free, even from our self-assured perspectives. God knows what is crippling you and me and announces that in Christ Jesus we are made free. God opens the future for us so that the crippling aspects of our past and present are not carried into tomorrow.

One of my favorite preachers from a summer week spent at the Chautauqua Institute invited worshipers to turn to their neighbors and tell them that they are set free. She would tell you to, look them straight in the eye, and with the compassion of Jesus tell them “*You are set free.*” Oh, how we all need to hear and receive God’s freeing Word of grace.

There will be, it seems in every time and place, some indignant leader who will try limiting God’s generous goodness, God’s ability to see a need and respond appropriately, God’s good pleasure to give the kingdom to people whose lives have been crippled by all sorts of things and situations. There will be people, who will quote scripture, limiting the generosity of God, the ability of God to straighten the crooked, cleanse the stained, mend the torn, repair the broken, heal the fevered, calm the chaotic, forgive the impossible. That day in the synagogue, that Sabbath day, the place where teaching strengthens and equips the community for life, Jesus called those trying to limit God’s generous goodness “hypocrites!”

This is the equivalent of get the log out of your own eye before you start picking and poking at the splinter in someone else’s. What better time and place for a daughter of Abraham to be restored than on a Sabbath at the synagogue in the presence of God. The crowd that day was rejoicing at the wonderful things Jesus is doing. The indignant hypocritical leaders were put to shame. But this only serves to further the division and judgment that follows Jesus to Jerusalem. Some people rejoice while others judge. Divisions escalate as the journey to Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday intensifies.

God’s promises can be taken for granted. They can be presumed upon. They can be cheapened. This was John the Baptizers warning “repent.” It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s warning during World War II with the rise of Hitler, “Cheap grace” he called it. This was Bishop Eaton’s warning to the ELCA that all our work centers on Christ Jesus and flows from his freeing word “you are set free.” Not free to do what you like, or abandon the assembly, or neglect thanksgiving, prayer, and praise, acts of kindness and mercy. No, it is precisely out of the assembly’s thanksgiving, prayer, praise, gathering, that we: wrestle with repentance, marvel at the richness of God’s gracious love for humanity, offer prayers on behalf of another, shout out praises during calamity, and receive bountifully from the thanksgiving rendered to God.

Each Sunday we use language, like a good author, we use words to mark the beginning of a new day, a new week, with thanksgiving, and prayer and praise. Something extraordinary takes place; we hear that we are set free in the words of absolution, in the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints, in the tangible Word of communion’s bread and wine. You are made free, set free from all that cripples you, cripples us, from all that keeps us from walking upright with our loving, gracious God. Today you are put right with God. As heirs of salvation rejoice at all the wonderful things God is doing. You are set free. Amen.