

I'm sure that for the woman who was crippled, bent over and unable to stand straight, it was a memorable, life-changing event, but the writer of Luke has given us all kinds of clues that there is something much bigger going on in this story than the simple healing of one anonymous woman.

Although she never asked for this miracle, and I would expect she had no expectation of having 18 years of spinal contortion to be healed in an instant, please note that Jesus says to her "Woman you have been set free from your ailment" Not healed but 'set free' and this is the first clue that Jesus is drawing us into a larger conversation – that there is something much bigger going on.

And that something is a Sabbath day given over to liberation. Liberation for this anonymous daughter of Abraham today, and a foretaste of the liberation that all would experience in God's beloved community, where all are free from the crushing grasp of power and everyone flourishes.

Why then would the synagogue leader stumble? Why would he reject this concrete example of God's power to bring creation back to perfection, to give life to this powerless woman? Because it was the Sabbath, and this faithful leader was well versed in the rabbis' teachings around the Sabbath. He knew the tradition. He knew how it ought to be done. And he just couldn't get past that.

He couldn't get past what 'everyone knows to be true' and 'how it is always done' to see the wonder of this new thing happening before his eyes. He couldn't move past the rituals of the past, and the wisdom he had received to comprehend a larger vision of God, and a broader definition of God at work in the world. He knew the community in which he grew up, whose traditions he had been taught, but couldn't see that Jesus was at work building a new community....and this new community was going to require some new habits, new attitudes, new teachings.

Jesus reminds us all that Sabbath was always a time and place for life to flourish and liberation to become real – starting today and building into God's future. Jesus re-defines justice by stretching old categories where women and children and the disabled are to be included. Just like he said at the very beginning of his ministry – his work – and ultimately our work as well – is to unlock the fetters of wickedness, untie the cords of the yoke and let the oppressed go free.

Here's the rub: we too often overlook or ignore those who are truly oppressed in our own time and in our own community. We take a wide path around the outcasts without asking ourselves, Are these folk today's wounded? Are they the ones who are crippled, bent over and unable to stand straight, who have no place in our shared community, no voice and no seat at the table? Who would Jesus turn to in mercy and compassion today?

The synagogue leader was stuck in old ruts just as we get stuck in old ruts. He was certain he knew how to define God's beloved people. We make the same mistake but with 21st c. twists. We think it's all been decided; it's all been taught before, and that we have nothing new to learn about our world and about ourselves ...or even about God.

But again and again throughout the scriptures, from Genesis to Revelation we are shown that if the poor, widows, strangers and the outcast do not matter to you than God does not matter to you. To live the religious life is to want the vulnerable to flourish and to work to make that possible.

So our focus as people of faith is not 'what does the tradition say' but 'what am I obligated to be and to do in response to the suffering of the powerless and weak?'

Jesus asks it this way in today's lesson "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?" Could there be a better day or a better time to make people whole? Have you decided that her suffering does not count, does not demand action on your part?

And if your religious traditions and teachings keep you from liberating her today when it is in your power to act on her behalf, then what God are you worshipping?

If your religious traditions preclude her from membership in your community, then what kind of community are you building? Is that the kind of community we want to be? Who is being locked out?

When Finley Donne wrote, "our job is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted" he was talking about journalism. But I believe it to be the task of preachers as well. We are called to invite the wounded and bleeding into a place where healing is possible

through Jesus and love is unconditional. But we are also called to challenge ourselves and our listeners to re-examine and re-evaluate and ultimately to revise our thoughts and actions to better align with God's beloved community.

Preachers are called to challenge all of us to move out of our comfort zone – that place where we are so sure of ourselves that our prayer life is pablum and our generosity is frozen in the 1980's and our idea of who God can and does love never makes us feel a bit unsettled....that place where we say to ourselves 'I've done my part. It's someone else's turn.'

Today the oppressed cry out for mercy, the wounded for healing and the hungry for food.

Today Jesus asks us, What will your response be to their suffering?