

SERMON: Lifted Up to Worship

TEXT: Luke 13:10-17

I was that bent-over woman, and I am grateful to be here with you today. I am grateful to be able to stand up straight before you. I am grateful to be able to lift and turn my head to look at all of your faces. I am grateful to be able to worship the Lord with you on this your Sabbath day.

I don't have a name, you understand, because the name of a woman didn't matter much in my day. Women weren't seen or noticed or given the time of day by men, unless we were needed to clean or cook or make a baby. I was even more invisible than other women, bent over like I was for eighteen years. It was so bad I could only look down and a little bit to either side. I could only see people from the waist down. And if they saw me at all, they looked right past, or they stopped quickly with a gasp. They thought I was a freak, or worse, they thought I was unclean or even contagious, so they would keep me at a distance.

Eighteen years I lived like that. The pain was not just physical, but emotional. I was desperately lonely. And the pain was spiritual. I was certain that God had cursed me for something I had done wrong. The thoughts tormented me.

I tried to live a good and righteous life. I wasn't perfect, of course, but this punishment was so severe. What had I done to make God so angry with me?

That's why I was at the synagogue that day. Every Sabbath day I went to worship. No one ever came near me, but at least they didn't shoo me away like they did in the marketplace. I listened to the teachings, and I prayed silently, praising God, but also looking for answers and begging for healing. Sometimes I would beg to die. "God, I don't want to live like this anymore. I'm no good to anyone. There's no reason for me to be here. I'm just a burden. The pain is unbearable; my body is a cruel and lonely prison. Lord, please have mercy on me. Let me die. Let me go. Set me free." Set me free. This was my constant prayer; whether through healing or through death, "Lord, set me free."

But that day – that day that you read about in your scriptures – that day was different. Someone saw me. Someone noticed me and didn't step back or gasp or turn away. Jesus saw me, and though I couldn't see his face, I felt his gaze upon me. I felt as though he saw right through me and knew every pain I'd ever suffered and every prayer I'd ever prayed. Suddenly I felt his hands on me, gentle and strong at the same time. Then I heard his voice; he was speaking to me! "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." With one hand on my arm he held

me; and with one hand on my back, he guided my bent spine forward until I was standing up straight. He raised me up. And I felt freer than I ever had before.

Looking around the room and seeing all those faces, seeing the face of Jesus and the love in his eyes, I simply couldn't contain my joy! When the leader of the synagogue began to walk briskly toward us with a severely furrowed brow, I thought he was angry with me for my dancing and shrieking and terrible lack of decorum.

Instead, he began shaking his finger at Jesus, and basically preaching the law for the whole crowd to hear: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." Jesus answered him, also sharing the berating with the crowd: "You hypocrites! Do 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?"

The leader of the synagogue huffed away, but I saw him blush in shame and bow his head as he did. And the crowd began to talk excitedly to one another. I think they were celebrating with me! And rejoicing in Jesus and his miracles. And

perhaps thinking of themselves or their loved ones with renewed hope for their healing.

Like I said before, I try to live a righteous life, to follow all God's commandments. I fully believe in keeping the Sabbath day holy. Actually, it became even more sacred to me after the day Jesus healed me. I suppose I'm biased; I can't possibly have an objective opinion about this. But to me, the healing that Jesus gave to me was not a work that distracted anyone from worshipping God. In fact, I believe it caused me and everyone who witnessed it focus more on God. That miracle added fuel to the fire of our passion for praise and prayer. That miracle drew us closer to God, helped us to see that God is real, that God works in our lives, that God truly loves us. It made me love God all the more. I believe I was LIFTED UP TO WORSHIP.

And that synagogue leader who rebuked Jesus for breaking the laws of Sabbath – I think he was focused on the letter of the law rather than on the spirit of the law. I believe he was the one who was distracted from God at that moment. Maybe he was angry that Jesus chose to heal a woman instead of a man. Or maybe he was jealous that Jesus was getting all the attention on his turf – the synagogue.

Maybe he felt threatened by the power that Jesus demonstrated. Maybe it was a combination of all these things.

But I can't believe that he wouldn't have wanted the same for himself or someone he loved had he been in my shoes. After suffering for eighteen years, what good reason would there be to wait one moment longer?

I'm sure that there were others in the synagogue that day who also needed healing and didn't receive it. Perhaps their illnesses were not as obvious as mine. I don't know the answer. And I don't take it lightly that I received an extraordinary gift while others did not. I think about this all the time. I pray that others would be healed. I pray that God would show me if there's something I can do to help them. "Make me aware, Lord; help me to see them. I can see their faces now. As I look into another person's eyes, help me to recognize the look of pain and suffering. Give me courage, Lord, to speak to them, to lend a hand, to offer a prayer, to let them know that someone understands their pain. And as I share my own story of healing, may it give them hope. May it give them renewed hope and strength. May it bring them closer to you. Show them, Lord, that healing comes in many ways. Make them aware of your presence. Show them that their suffering does not diminish your love. Remind us all of your promises, O God: that you will

never leave us or forsake us; that there is nothing that can separate us from your love. Remind us of your faithfulness, and help us to be faithful in our worship of you.”

Finally, I believe that Jesus healed me that day not just for my sake, but to teach us many lessons: That women and others whom we see as “less than” are just as important, just as worthy as anyone else. That observing the Sabbath is about honoring God, and honoring God is about serving and loving others. That healing is possible for individuals, for the church, for the community. That healing comes in many ways: physical, emotional, spiritual. That worshipping God, in itself, brings healing.

Thank you for listening to my story. As they did that day when Jesus healed me, I hope everyone in this crowd will go out rejoicing at all the wonderful things Jesus is doing... to the glory of God!

AMEN.