

"What's One More Day?"

There are many ways that one could look at this miracle of Jesus. I have, in fact, done just that as I have preached from this text several times, each time from a different viewpoint. Which sometimes makes it harder for the Spirit to speak, both to the writer of the sermon and to the listeners who may have heard it just as many times.

The easiest thing to do when examining this story would be to focus on the woman, as her condition is the most critical, at first glance. Luke tells us that this woman was bent over. He means that she was completely doubled over with her face toward the ground, as if her body made an upside down "V". Luke goes on to say that she has been this way for EIGHTEEN YEARS. Friends that is 6,570 days!

Now the physical pain she must have endured seems almost too obvious to mention. So what about the emotional pain? For eighteen years she had been unable to see anything but dust and dirt and rocks and feet. Turning her head from left to right, but unable to look straight into a person's eyes when they spoke. Unable to enjoy the sunrise or the chamomile and oleander that grew in Palestine in Jesus' day. Unable to discover where a laugh or a cry came from. Swinging her head like an elephant walking through a three-ringed circus. Which I suppose, is what her life may have been like.

But then again, how many of us have spent time "bent over" from physical pain. Or if not physically, how many of us have been bent over from anger or loneliness or resentment or

envy or grief or doubt? Probably everyone here can relate to the status of being bent over, of having limited vision, of wondering how and when our circumstances will ever change.

Of course, another prime suspect for the main character in this sermon would be the leader of the synagogue – a Pharisee. Every now and then my husband will tell me that I am a Pharisee. I try to take it as a compliment, since the Pharisees were well respected, even though I know he doesn't mean it that way. Still my ego puffs up a little because I know he is referring to my tendency to be a rule follower. And who doesn't need rules? Rules keep us safe. They help us establish boundaries. And SOMEONE has to be in charge of knowing and keeping the rules. This is why God made Pharisees in the first place, right?

But I know that is not what he means. He is not complimenting the fact that I am righteous but rather commenting on my self-righteousness! Maybe that is because when push comes to shove, I really CAN be Pharisic. Or maybe it is only because my husband is the OPPOSITE of a Pharisee, whatever that is. He lives more by the creed that "rules were made to be broken". Want to guess who got in trouble in school more?

But in their defense, it was the JOB of the Pharisees in Jesus' day to know and interpret the rules. And to decide when rules can be broken. Of course there is a fine art to distinguishing between upholding the rules and allowing in "really exceptional cases" for the rules to be broken, or maybe just a little bent. And so when Jesus heals the bent over woman on the Sabbath the leader of the synagogue makes a good point.

There is a rule against healing on the Sabbath. Honor the Sabbath and keep it Holy. Right in the Ten Commandments! So it isn't that the leader is against healing, per se, just against Jesus' timing. He stresses that there are rules to be considered. Important . . . religious . . . rules. And not just the commandments but rules made about the rules. Maybe even Robert's Rules. Or

the Book of Order which provides for decent and orderly ways to do divine work and worship. There are processes and procedures in place for good reasons. As an Interim minister, I can only begin to imagine the chaos without all these rules.

So the leader of the synagogue reminds Jesus that there are six days where this type of thing would have been just wonderful and only one where it is off limits. ONE MEASLY DAY. You have six days to help straighten things out, he stresses. And after all she has been this way for 18 years – so what is one more day? One more day!

But the more I studied and prayed about this miracle, the more I realized that this story is not really about the woman of the leader of the synagogue. It is primarily about Jesus. Jesus saw the woman. She did not seek him out or beckon to him in any way. Our savior saw her condition and her need and by his actions he said to every one there, "NOT ONE MORE DAY". And in doing so, he answers my previous question about what is the opposite of a Pharisee – the rule keepers. Of course, it is Jesus, the Christ, the rule breaker.

The heart of this text is about Jesus because it tells us, first and foremost, that Jesus does what he says he will do. In Luke 4, when Jesus preached his very first sermon in his own home town, he said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free." And Jesus is doing just that when he touches the woman and enables her to stand up straight for the first time in 18 years. He frees her from oppression.

So the question that this story begs is, who do *we* want to be like for one more day? I am afraid that we, in the church, are too often like that leader of the synagogue. We see people bent over with illness and oppression and doubt and fear and lack of resources and we say to ourselves, "I have so much going on right now. After all, what is one more day?"

We are asked to serve on a committee or help with the youth or volunteer at Carpenter's Table and we make the excuse that so-and-so always does that so I will go to the lake or put off giving a commitment until next month or next year. After all, "What's one more day?"

And if we are honest with ourselves, we know that our Pharisaic tendencies are not restricted to the church. Because when we don't even cringe at the violence that has become all too routine on the news and instead mute the television we are saying, "What's one more day?" When we see a disabled person and look away as if their condition is contagious, we are saying, "What's one more day?" When we judge someone because they *appear* to be Middle Eastern or because their children are misbehaving in the grocery store or because they are holding a sign that says, "WILL WORK FOR FOOD" we are saying, "What's one more day?"

Of course, there are times when we are the woman. Times when we are bent over, either by sin or by circumstances, and we go to the synagogue but don't seek Jesus out. Luke tells us that the woman was there but there is no indication that she came to see Jesus or sought him out in any way. She may have come because she heard Jesus would be there or going to synagogue on the Sabbath may have just been part of her routine. Like many of us, she may have gone out of habit with no real expectations at all that the teaching, preaching, prayers or music will change us in any way.

But thanks be to God that Jesus does not always wait for us to come to him. Isaiah told the captives in Babylon that when the savior came that every valley would be lifted up and the rough places a plain. Some translations say, "The crooked shall be made straight." Jesus, the good shepherd, came to seek and save the lost, the exiled, the sick, the oppressed, the grieving, the outcast. He came to make sense of our crooked and bent over humanity and no to wait just one more day.

And so of course, this miracle story calls us to think about two things. First, we are to try to be like Jesus. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer together we pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." But do we think about what that means? What is the kingdom and God and how will we know it when we find it. I believe that Jesus' actions in this story tell us that wherever Jesus is, we will find the kingdom of God. Wherever Jesus is, all things will be made right. And friends, if this is the future that God is preparing us for, how might we contribute to some manifestation of it now?

I think I caught a glimpse of the kingdom of God in Rio this week, as did many of you. New Zealand runner Nikki Hamblin was lying on the track, dazed after a heavy fall and with her hopes of an Olympic medal seemingly over. Suddenly, there was a hand on her shoulder and a voice in her ear. It was American Abbey D'Agostino, offering to help. She said to her competitor, "Get up. This is the Olympics Games. We have to finish this."

It started when D'Agostino clipped Hamblin from behind and they both went sprawling with about 2,000 meters to go. Hamblin fell heavily on her right shoulder. D'Agostino got up, but Hamblin was just lying there. She appeared to be crying.

Instead of running in pursuit of the others, D'Agostino crouched down and put her hand on the New Zealander's shoulder, then under her arms to help her up, and softly urged her not to quit. "That girl is the Olympic spirit right there," Hamblin said of D'Agostino. "I've never met her before. Such an amazing woman."

As it turned out, D'Agostino probably needed more help: She soon realized she'd hurt her ankle in the fall. Grimacing, she refused to give up, though, running nearly half the race with the injury. Hamblin did what she could, hanging back with Abbey for a little while to return the favor and offer encouragement. "She helped me first. I tried to help her. She was pretty bad,"

Hamblin told reporters. She eventually had to leave D'Agostino behind and was certain that the American would have to stop. But when she turned around she realized she was still running.

Hamblin waited for her new friend to cross the line and they hugged. This time, it was D'Agostino who was in tears. As D'Agostino was about to be taken away in a wheelchair, she stretched out her right hand and the two runners gripped each other's forearms for a few moments. Hamblin said, "I'm never going to forget that moment. When someone asks me what happened in Rio in 20 years' time, that's my story ... That girl shaking my shoulder, (saying) 'come on, get up'."

Like Jesus, these fine athletes didn't say "What's one more day, or one more lap?" They saw someone bent over and reached out to a sister in need. And the kingdom of God came to the Olympic tracks in Rio.

But the other thing that this story begs us to do is to emulate the woman after her life was made straight. Luke tells us that when Jesus laid his hands on her, *immediately* she stood up and began praising God. The leader of the synagogue didn't even take the time to ask her how it felt to have her back straight for the first time in 18 years or if the sun hurt her eyes when she looked at the sky. He just began to criticize Jesus to the crowd.

But the woman, realizing that the presence of Jesus had changed her life forever did not wait one more day. She began to praise God. Both Jesus and the woman realized that the kingdom of God is where people choose love over legalism every time. Restoration over rules. Every time. And so friends, when we sense a need and reach out to heal in whatever way God enables us to – no matter what the rules tell us – then we, like Jesus are saying, "Not one more day." And the kingdom of God has come. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.