

Words on the Way: *You Are Set Free*
Luke 13:10-17
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
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Dr. Brent Beasley

For several weeks now we have been on a journey with Jesus. Where is he going? He is going to Jerusalem: the place where crisis will be created between him and the authorities to the point that he is killed. He is on the way to Jerusalem—the climactic moment of his life and ministry.

If you follow Jesus along this way, starting back in the 9th chapter of Luke, and you read all of Jesus' words on the way, the things he has to say on his way to Jerusalem and about what it means to be one of his followers, you start to feel the weight of his demands. You start to feel that the demands of following Jesus are heavy.

Just think about some of the phrases Jesus utters along this way: leave the dead to bury the dead; whoever puts the hand to the plow and looks back; carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; shake the dust off your feet; go and do likewise; one thing is necessary; sell all your possessions and give to the poor; be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour; I came to bring fire to the earth, not peace but division.

There may be, after several weeks of this, an accumulated burden that we are starting to feel. And so when we come to this passage today, we are relieved to find that it is a story of Jesus healing someone. Ahh, a nice, uplifting healing story. A positive, encouraging healing.

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent and quite unable to stand up straight.

She is not just a woman with an infirmity but, as Luke says, with the spirit of an infirmity. Whatever it was that had bent her, whatever emotional or physical burden she had born, Luke suggests, ultimately became part of her until her very body was conformed to its image.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

Very nice. It's nice to have a story like this and to be free from all that conflict we've had in the previous passages, those tough, confrontational words from Jesus about not bringing peace.

But then we keep reading:

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?¹⁶ 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?”

Here comes the tension again. Here comes the conflict and the division.

How does Jesus create such a crisis here by reaching out in love to this woman, by setting her free? Jesus breaks at least six strict cultural rules:

1. Jesus speaks to the woman. In civilized society, Jewish men did not speak to women. Remember the story in John 4 where Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well. She was shocked because a Jew would speak to a Samaritan. But when the disciples returned, the Scripture records, *They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman...*

2. He calls her to the center of the synagogue. By placing her in the center of the synagogue, he challenges the notion of a male monopoly on access to knowledge and to God.

3. He touches her, which violates the holiness code. That is the Old Testament code that protected men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness.

4. He calls her "daughter of Abraham," a term not found in any of the prior Jewish literature. This is revolutionary because it was believed that women were saved through their men. To call her a daughter of Abraham is to make her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God. She is not just the husband of a man who is a "son of Abraham." She herself is a "daughter of Abraham."

5. He heals on the Sabbath, the holy day.

6. Last, and not least, he challenges the ancient belief that her illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. He says that it is evil bondage that cripples her. And he sets her free.

And Jesus breaks all of these cultural rules in a few seconds. *[Quoted in Suzanne Luper's sermon, "Can Jesus Be Redeemed?, September 17, 2000," North Raleigh United Church]*

The breaking of these rules did not go unnoticed by the Jewish leaders. The leader of the synagogue was shocked by Jesus' behavior. Here was a man who did not find a healing service listed in the order of worship that Sabbath, and he didn't like the deviation.

He was like the usher in a church where a man under the influence staggered into the service and sat on the front row. As the preacher started his sermon, the gentleman shouted "Amen" or "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah" after almost every sentence.

The entire congregation was becoming agitated about this unusual behavior so the usher made his way to the front to escort the gentleman out. When the usher informed him that he was making too much noise, he replied, *Well, brother, I've just got the Holy Spirit!*

To which the usher replied, *Well, you didn't get it here so you gotta leave!*

By the power of God, Jesus healed the bent woman, set her free, and the synagogue leader's response was, *Well, you didn't get it here! Not on the Sabbath! You gotta leave!*

Jesus came disturbing the peace of the religious people, the religious leaders. He came disturbing the peace in the house of God. Jesus is willing to create crisis to set a woman free.

And we're reminded of Jesus' words from last week in Luke 12: *I came to bring fire to the earth. Not peace but division.*

So I said last Sunday in talking about that that in fact Jesus did come to disturb the peace. He came to disturb the false and superficial peace that accepts and ignores the injustice and death-dealing ways and brokenness of our world.

Many of you have talked to me about what I said about this woman named Lisa Fithian who is something like a professional protestor. What I said last Sunday was something she said in an interview: *When people ask me, 'What do you do?,' I say I create crisis, because crisis is that edge where change is possible.*

And I wondered: Is this not what Jesus meant when he spoke of bringing fire to the earth— of not bringing peace? Did he not seek to bring crisis as *that edge where change is possible?*

And so Jesus comes disturbing the peace. Here today he comes disturbing the peace of the religious people, the religious leaders. He sets a woman free—but in doing so he confronts the authorities and powers that be. He creates crisis.

A peace that requires God's children to stay bound up is not a peace Jesus can accept. A peace that allows God's child to be bent over with burdens is not a peace Jesus can accept. A peace that will not allow him to set a person free is not a peace

that Jesus can live with. It is a peace that Jesus will literally die to disturb.

Last week when I was contemplating this idea of Jesus creating crisis, disturbing any peace that is false or unjust, I came across a sermon preached by Martin Luther King in Louisville, Kentucky on March 29, 1956.

In his sermon he talks about how a federal judge handed down a decision requiring the University of Alabama to stop denying admission on the basis of race. After that decision, a woman named Autherine Lucy was accepted as the first black student in the history of the University of Alabama.

However, as soon as Autherine Lucy walked on the campus, crisis ensued. A group of students began threatening her. Crosses were burned; eggs and bricks were thrown at her. The mob jumped on top of the car in which she was riding. Finally, the president and trustees of the University of Alabama asked Autherine to leave for her own safety and the safety of the University.

In his sermon Martin Luther King tells all this. Then he says: *The next day after Autherine was dismissed, the paper came out with this headline: "Things are quiet in Tuscaloosa today. There is peace [again] on the campus of the University of Alabama."*

I want to share with you what Dr. King said about this peace in his sermon. The title of his sermon is "When Peace Becomes Obnoxious."

Yes, things are quiet in Tuscaloosa. Yes, there was peace on the campus, but it was peace at a great price. It was peace that had been purchased at the price of capitulating to the force of darkness.

This is the type of peace that all men of goodwill hate. It is the type of peace that is obnoxious. It is the type of peace that stinks in the nostrils of the Almighty God.

In a very profound passage which has been often misunderstood, Jesus utters this: He says, "Think not that I am come to bring peace. I come not to bring peace but a sword." Certainly, He is not saying that he comes not to bring peace in the higher sense. What He is saying is: "I come not to bring this peace of escapism, this peace that fails to confront the real issues of life, the peace that makes for stagnant complacency."

Then He says, "I come to bring a sword" not a physical sword. Whenever I come, a conflict is precipitated between the old and the new, between justice and injustice, between the forces of light and the forces of darkness.

I come to declare war over injustice. I come to declare war on evil. Peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—war, tension, confusion, but it is the presence of some positive force—justice, goodwill, the power of the kingdom of God.

I had a long talk with a man the other day about this bus situation. He discussed the peace being destroyed in the community, the destroying of good race relations. I agree that it is more tension now. But peace is not merely the absence of this tension, but the presence of justice.

And even if we didn't have this tension, we still wouldn't have positive peace. Yes, it is true that if the Negro accepts his place, accepts exploitation and injustice, there will be peace. But it would be a peace boiled down to stagnant complacency, deadening passivity, and if peace means this, I don't want peace.

- 1) If peace means accepting second-class citizenship, I don't want it.*
- 2) If peace means keeping my mouth shut in the midst of injustice and evil, I don't want it.*
- 3) If peace means being complacently adjusted to a deadening status quo, I don't want peace.*
- 4) If peace means a willingness to be exploited economically, dominated politically, humiliated and segregated, I don't want peace.*

And so Jesus comes disturbing the peace to bring genuine peace. Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, comes disturbing the accepted peace of the day to bring real peace.

Here in our story today he comes disturbing the peace of the religious people, the religious leaders. Jesus is willing to create crisis to set a woman free.

Why? Because Jesus' love and grace and compassion for this woman trump everything else. Was he just looking for a fight? No. His love trumps everything else.

Jesus is filled with compassion for this woman—this woman who is bent over from some physical or emotional burden she's been carrying for 18 years.

The point of all this is that Jesus will disturb any peace that ignores the burdens we carry. Jesus will confront any peace that would prevent him from reaching out in love and grace to set this woman free—to set you free. To lift that burden.

Jesus saw a need and he responded in compassion. He didn't wait for her to ask, he didn't require her to beg, it didn't matter what day of the week it was, and it didn't matter what the people in charge or anybody else thought about it. His love for humanity and his compassion toward those who suffer overruled the religious people's rules. He was willing to break all six of those strict rules if that's what it took to treat this burdened woman as a child of God.

And when Jesus touches a person with his love, there is no denying the transformative power, the healing power of his grace.

I heard the story told recently about a little girl living in a rural community. It was just a few years ago, but it was one of those rural towns where driving down Main Street is like driving back into the thirties. She lived in a little house and went to a two-room school.

She had loving parents and, from time to time, a good teacher. But the way she was growing up was not the way you would want your little girl to grow up. She had a cleft palate and the money for the repair hadn't been there. By the time she was seven, she knew what she was and what the world was. She had heard the phrase, "only a mother could love that" and she understood it. One day a special teacher visited the school and put the children through some basic speech and hearing tests. When it was her turn, the little girl went into the classroom that had been set aside for the exams.

Just stand over there by the door, the teacher said from her desk at the far end of the room. *I want to test your hearing first. Turn your back, face the door and tell me what you hear me say. Apple*, the teacher said in a low voice. *Apple*, the little girl repeated. *Man*, the teacher said. *Man*, the little girl repeated. *Banana. Banana. Okay*, the teacher said, *Now a sentence*. The girl knew that the sentences were usually fairly easy—she wasn't the first child to take the test, after all. She'd heard from the other kids you could expect something like, *The sky is blue* or *Are your shoes brown?* Still, she listened very carefully. So it was that standing with her face against the door, she heard the teacher's whisper quite clearly, *I wish you were my little girl*.

[told in a sermon by Dr. Jana Childers, 30GoodMinutes.org, February 6, 2005] The God who saw a true daughter of Abraham in a bent over woman, is the same God who sees God's own child in all those in this world with burdens to bear.

And this God will disturb any peace necessary, will push aside any rule or religious person he needs to in order to get to the person he loves and to give the love he wants to give and to touch with compassion and grace.

I don't want to be the religious person who gets between God and someone he loves, do you? I don't want to be the one who tries to tell Jesus, *You can't set that person free. That's against our rules*.

Because this is a God who looks at the one hurting and says, *I wish you were my little girl*. Actually, more than that, God says, *You are my little girl. This is my little girl*. And woe to the one who tries to get between a parent and his child.

Jesus confronts the religious ones who would prevent him getting to this child of God, the ones who would prevent him from setting this woman free. And the result is conflict, tension, a house divided.

Such is the effect sometimes of the presence of Jesus and the breaking in of the reign of God in the world. A crisis is created; but if setting a woman free shatters an unhealthy peace, then crisis it has to be.

Because, as Jesus says, *You are mine. And you are set free.*