



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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On Being Set Free

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 21, 2016
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 13:10-17*

When I was a junior in high school, I wished for and received a sleek new water ski at Christmas. Several weeks later (this is Central Florida), I tried out my new ski, which included trying to drop it and ski barefoot. Well, the next thing I knew was that new sleek ski had become a torpedo—by going down into the water and springing at a fierce rate up into my jaw and splitting open my face.

My buddy, Bob Weber, hid his shock by calmly looking into my ashen face—that was looking more and more like a butchered flank steak—and declaring in an upbeat tone: "I think we need to get you to shore and see if we can see a doctor."

When I came to in the hospital, my neighbor and plastic surgeon, Dr. Wilibur, was staring down at me and said, "Well, we're going to give you a new face."

Now, even by high school I was a fairly mature and convinced Christian, but it's humbling to learn firsthand how rapidly a grounded theology reverts to infantile bargaining, pleading and threats. During the first few days of healing I did a good bit of all three. When my Bible-study buddies came to the hospital to visit me, I recollect one of them saying to me, "I suppose your accident caused you to do a lot of praying?"

Not really. I did a fair amount of cursing my misfortune, but I offered few petitions to heaven. In fact I remember a distinct sour mood. However, it was about the third afternoon of convalescence that I was seized by a sudden moment of unspeakable gratitude—grateful to be alive, thankful that I was going to be all right, and exceedingly glad that I had buddies who would pull me from the water (where I could have drowned), and grateful that a fabulous physician was right on hand.

Probe anyone deep enough and we discover that everyone has had at least a few occasions of significant setback, illness, and dysfunction . . . adjoined by the needs of restoration and liberation. Simply because we are human, all of us deal with brokenness. Some of us deal with broken bodies, others with broken relationships, broken hearts, broken dreams or broken spirits.

Luke tells us about one desperate woman in today's gospel text. Likely suffering from what physicians now call "spondyloarthritis," a condition that can leave one with vertebrae of the spine that are bent and twisted. She has been living with this condition for 18 years . . .

Now, none of us (that I know of) is dealing with spondyloarthritis, but few, if any of us are not in dire need of healing and wholeness in some aspect of our lives. In fact, I don't know anyone who is completely whole, totally well. All of us are in one way or another searching for some type of healing and redemption. Or as Jesus says in the gospel lesson: "You will be set free from your ailment . . . from your bondage."

Luke gives us a vignette of a healing and liberating process that can be ours.

The first thing that leaps out at us from the text is that Jesus makes himself available to this unnamed woman. While he is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, Jesus calls her over and heals her.

The second thing to notice is that Jesus touches her. Seemingly, Jesus took her aside from the multitudes and touched her infirmities. Time and time again Jesus gave his whole attention to the personal concern of a troubled or sick person. He felt the timid touch of one troubled woman in a crowd; he singled out the lonely Zacchaeus hiding in the tree; among the noise and confusion at Calvary, he heard the cry of a dying thief. He understands our needs of healing and wholeness and says, "You are set free from your ailments."

Imagine the relief she must feel when, after 18 years stooped over and unable to stand tall, Jesus lifts her out of illness. And consider how her perspective must have changed. Like my own experience in high school, she must have a soaring gratitude, a glorious new vision for the future. But in doing so, Jesus breaks all kinds of social and religious decorum.

So, there's more to the story! Along with the healing of the woman, Jesus confronts another illness among those who rebuke him for healing on the Sabbath. This is classic Jesus behavior: lifting up the lowly while knocking the mighty ones down from their thrones. They are caught by their own hypocrisy, pride, and legalism. They are working from the dis-ease of self-righteousness and self-interest, blaming and shaming their way into captivity. This is a time-honored illness. I want it my way, with my people, according to my standards, based on my place, my domination, my culture, my skin color, my orientation, my heritage, my party, my . . . my . . . my. And we might respond: "Well, my, my!"

In the midst of this much more severe illness all of us are prompted to ask: "Do you want to be healed? Do I want to be healed? Do we want to be healed?" Like the other healing story of the paralytic by the pool, we who are on our faith pilgrimage opt for the excuse or the projection. It is always easier to blame someone else: "It's the President's fault, it's the government's fault, it's the bishop's fault, it's the rector or the vestry's fault, it's my mother or father's fault, it's the school's fault. It must be Jesus because he's healing on the Sabbath!

So I ask again, "Do you want to be healed? Do I want to be healed? Does our nation want to be healed? Does our church want to be healed? It is not an exaggeration to say that our church is "by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed." Many of us who grew up in the Episcopal Church at a time when the most serious divisions were among the "low and lazy, the broad and hazy and the high and crazy," now marvel that our church continues to be divided between those who believe that the church makes room for "all sorts and conditions," even those with spondylitis, and those who define orthodoxy very narrowly.

Luke then describes the last phase of the process of healing. He states that following the woman's healing, "the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." I looked up the Greek word used for "rejoicing." It means "to be struck out of oneself." And I thought: That's it! When we have come to God with transparency and need and received God's liberating and healing grace, when we are set free from our ailments, including our self-righteousness, then we are "struck out of ourselves" with joy and gratitude.

Let me ask you: "Are you struck out of yourself" in thanksgiving for what God has done, with the healing and liberation that has happened in your life, how you were enabled to turn the corner and write new chapters? Have you been astounded at the "stooped down and rising up" of your life? That is, you were low and now you have been raised up?

In a long ago Italian village, there was a holy monastery on the top of the hill overriding the valley. One day when an elderly and wise monk was milling around the shopping carts of the village, an older peasant woman asked the monk: "So, I have always marveled at the holiness of the monastery. What makes you so holy?" The wise old monk said, "Well, it's quite simple my friend: when I fall down, God raises me up, when I slide sideways, God straitens my path, and when I become ill, God heals me, liberates my life, and sets me free to be of service."

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