

A WORD THAT SETS US FREE

A Sermon for the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 22, 2010,

Text: Luke 13:10-17

“But you have come to . . . the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” (from the second reading, Hebrews 12:18-29)

A *better* word.

Not only Hebrews, but the gospel reading portrays a contest between two words. Two assertions. Two interpretations. “God, whose almighty Word . . .” of which we just sang? What is your word?

The warnings given by the leader of the synagogue—“go away and come back for healing on a day that is not a Sabbath”—hearken back to words spoken at Sinai: “if even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” What is holy must not be desecrated: holy mountain, holy commandments, holy God, holy space, holy time—the Sabbath. Sin will bring death. So, Abel’s innocent blood called for vengeance.

The words of the Lord on that Sabbath day, however, bespeak a second Word: “the sprinkled blood that speaks *a better word* than the blood of Abel.” A word from God, a holy Word, yet a word not of warning or revenge, but of mercy. A word that sets us free.

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath.

The Sabbath was a day of intentional rest for the children of Israel. Two different intentions are proposed in the Old Testament for the Sabbath. By one account the Sabbath is a reminder of how God rested from his creation work after the sixth day—therefore, his children should rest from their work also, to remember that God is the one who gave us all things, and not we ourselves.

Another account says: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day. Creation; salvation.

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

Life is like that, right? There are people who have problems. After a few years, you begin to accept that that is just the way they are. And you identify the person with the problem. The woman probably was known by her problem. Even if people knew her name, her principal identifying characteristic was that she was bent over. Maybe that even became her nickname. And it was the first thing strangers noticed about her—what was not right with her. They didn’t

care if she was good at math. So there she was in the synagogue, just like some normal person, observing the Sabbath. A woman who didn't have a prayer.

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.

There is no indication that the woman showed faith in Jesus, or that she sought his aid. She did not cry out, as some did, "Lord, have mercy on me." I guess after eighteen years she had given up hope of a cure. She thought of herself, perhaps, the same way other people thought of her—as afflicted. A cripple. Cursed. But Jesus looked at her differently. Jesus saw her. He saw the affliction, but that was not all he saw. He didn't know her name, but he called her over, laid his hands on her, as you do when you bless someone, and **announced** to her that she had been separated from her problem. She was free. The bond between her and her diagnosis had been broken.

Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. She may have recalled a particular psalm and begun reciting it; I don't know. Maybe she just started saying "Praise Yahweh; praise the Lord." But there is no indication of a period of puzzlement, of letting it hit her slowly, of savoring the experience—just praise to God for doing this to her.

God had worked six days, and on the seventh he had just now put in a little overtime, fixing something that had gotten broken. Or you could say, God had once again led one of his people out of bondage into the promised land. Under either interpretation of the Sabbath, this was great timing for a liberation/healing.

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."

Why was he indignant with Jesus for curing on the Sabbath? It is possible to guess several underlying thoughts he may have had. For example, the curing drew attention away from the leader to the visitor, and he may have been jealous. Or he may have been genuinely concerned that Jesus was turning a solemn occasion of holy teaching into a wicked violation of the divine prohibition of working on the Sabbath. Whichever way he reasoned, he chose a weird way of expressing it. Instead of upbraiding Jesus, who seemingly had broken the rules, he went around to the crowd—apparently there were a bunch of other people who looked like they were standing in line to be healed—and tried to shoo them away: "There are plenty of other days to be healed on. Don't come here for healing on the Sabbath, of all days! Go on! Get away."

Get this: He was telling people not to come to the synagogue! He was pushing people away from healing! The ambulance had driven up to the emergency room, and they were reading the sign and it said Hours: 9-6, Monday-Friday. Closed weekends!

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? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham for crying out loud, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

The easy job was laying his hands on a woman and telling her “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” She immediately stood up straight and praised God.

Now, the tough part: laying his hands on society, and telling it not that it was set free, but that it remained in bondage. The woman was now free; the leader of the synagogue remained in bondage, bent over and quite unable to help people stand up straight. In fact, Jesus often complained that the religious authorities were guilty of binding heavy burdens on people and not lifting a finger to help them.

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.

Well, not quite. His opponents would regroup, and in the end they would get him crucified for disrupting a system that told people when to come and be healed: not on the Sabbath, please.

And the crowd that “rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing”? A lot of them would doubtless wander back to status quo, with no memory of anything particular to praise God for.

Maybe we are bent over nearly double inside with worries and fears. Perhaps we live in bondage less obvious than that of the woman in the story. Or perhaps we suffer from the thinking of the leader: *trying to make the world right by making everyone do the right things*. Isn't it hard, when so many people don't see as clearly as we do exactly what everyone would have to do, so that we could save the world together? Isn't it frustrating? Don't you just want to slap people sometimes for their pigheaded wrongheadedness?

God is working today. Overtime. He has punched in in Christ for the explicit purpose of saving his creation from itself. As he worked that first Easter to raise his Son; as he worked through that same Jesus one Sabbath, to raise up a daughter who was bowed down. God is working through his word and this sacrament to announce to us, too, that we are set free—for Jesus' sake—from *our* ailment. From bondage to sin and death, free to stand up, praise God, and live strong and free, under him in his kingdom of righteousness and peace.