

First Trinity Lutheran Church
Luke 13:10-17
August 26, 2007

“I am with you Always”

Here’s how her story unfolds: “(Jesus) was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and there was (this) woman there possessed by a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years...bent double and unable to stand up straight.” Can you imagine having to endure such an incapacitating situation for “eighteen years?” I read about a preaching professor in the seminary who made his student’s walk around the classroom bent over for over an hour and then had them write a sermon of this text.

No doubt some of us can imagine it! In fact, some of us have lived it, either personally or through loved ones, haven’t we? And we’ve known what the woman knew. Over time illness changes everything about us; our facial expression, the way we carry ourselves, the way we talk, things hoped for, dreams to which we aspired. It’s as though the illness takes on a character all its own.

A prominent medical journal describes it this way “suffering any disease is a suffering of loss upon loss. Loss of physical health; the ability to move as one wishes, or make a living, or deal with basic bodily functions. Appetite may disappear. Many gradually lose their ability to think clearly.”

And yet, as difficult and troubling as each of these losses is, the article went on to say that “the most deeply wounding loss of all is the loss of love, of human companionship, of the respect and support of other people.” I wonder if, maybe, the woman in this morning’s gospel lesson didn’t know something about such losses. I bet she did.

What I find interesting in this story that the woman doesn’t use her eighteen-year ailment as a reason to become estranged from a life of worship in the local synagogue. Instead, each and

every Sabbath, she'd drag her bent over body to the local synagogue. One Sabbath day, with Jesus in attendance, her bondage to a bent and broken body ended. "When Jesus saw her he called her and said, 'You are rid of your trouble,' and he laid his hands on her. Immediately, she straightened up and began to praise God." And with that, we breathe a sigh of relief, right?

Well, not so fast. After all, what do we do with those who are ill, some maybe it is someone we love, or ourselves for that matter, that have not been released from some sickness or others? What do we do with the others? You know, the huddled masses, yearning to be free? Like the teenagers selling their bodies in the back alleys of our cities? Or the dying, or those with no home? What about the parents who place flowers on the fresh grave of their only child; the old man who takes his magic marker and blacks out another day on the calendar? What will Jesus do with each and all of them?

It is possible that Luke included this story in his gospel, not as a way of saying that Jesus will always heal our every hurt, but that in the presence of Jesus the powers that crush human souls are being overcome. Could it not be that Luke included this story so that those who hear this woman's story will find faith in what God is doing in Christ?

It was Helen Keller, herself no stranger to the anguish of sickness and social rejection, who once said "although the world's full of suffering, it's also full of those overcoming of it." The gospel writers would agree. In point of fact, this morning's gospel story says that the woman "began to praise God." Praise God for having been healed yes but also a celebration of God's conquest of all the forces of sickness, witnessed in the healing of her own body and soul.

I believe that Jesus truly hurt whenever his eyes beheld people in pain. And I'm convinced Jesus still feels the same for all who suffer, down in the depths of his own being "What're you going through?" Christ drinks deeply of each human sorrow, poring peace into

pained hearts. The Christ who healed that bent and broken woman empties his own soul in order to receive the very suffering of the person he's looking at in mercy.

This morning's gospel reading reminds us that Jesus is moved by the helplessness of people. He looks into the dark bedroom where a child hides her bruised face and black eye in a tear-stained pillow. Jesus looks into the dimly lit kitchen, where a parent sits alone at 2 a.m. waiting for a child who'll never come home. He looks into the hospitals and homeless shelters; into the cracks and crevices of life, where the wounded hide their heartache. And he's moved, deeply and eternally, moved by the wounds inflicted by cruelty, injustice, or just by the painful and perplexing side of life.

And because Christ's interest is in caring for the comfortless this is where our mission begins. Jesus never said that we needed to become experts in communications theory or promotional agents. What he wanted, and still wants, is a community willing to get out there and put its faith on the line at the frontiers of human suffering. He wants us to risk stepping into the shoes, of another's pain, with a kind word; a gentle, graceful touch; a tender, empowering embrace. Christ calls for a community welcoming all that shoulder the sorrows of others in his name and to his glory.

The work of discipleship is demanding. Jesus knows that. He should, he created it. So, he gives us more than a promise. He offers us his presence and power. "I'm with you always" he said. Amen