

Sermon – “Unfolding Lives”

Sunday, August 21, 2022

Scripture Readings - Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13:10-17

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Our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 1:4-10. In addition to being the longest book in the Bible, Jeremiah provides more information about the personal life of the prophet than any other book. In the story of his call, Jeremiah is assured of God’s presence from the beginning of his life. This was a source of comfort and strength. Just as Jesus encountered opposition from the religious leaders, so did Jeremiah. They questioned his authority and rejected his message. This is the Word of God.

*<sup>4</sup> Now the word of the LORD came to me saying, <sup>5</sup> “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.” <sup>6</sup> Then I said, “Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to me, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. <sup>8</sup> Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.” <sup>9</sup> Then the LORD put out God’s hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. <sup>10</sup> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” Amen.*

Our second scripture reading is Luke 13:10-17. This is the last time Jesus enters the synagogue according to Luke. Jesus uses the opportunity not only to bring wholeness to the woman who was bent over for 18 years, but also to challenge those whose religious indignation has them so bent out of shape they cannot share her joy. Listen to God’s Holy word.

*<sup>10</sup> Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit of weakness that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup> 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.” <sup>15</sup> 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? <sup>16</sup> 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?” <sup>17</sup> When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. Amen.*

The title: “Unfolding Lives”

*The text: “When Jesus laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” Luke 13:13*

Let us pray. Healing God, thank you for your grace, which brings wholeness and dignity to our unfolding lives. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

Three weeks ago, we reflected together on Hosea’s description of God as one who “*bends down...to feed, to lift up and to hold.*” We talked about how strength and flexibility are both necessary in the act of bending and how grateful we are to have a God who is willing to bend on our behalf...and who invites us to bend on behalf of one another.

Dr. George Vaillant, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School describes resilient human beings as those having “both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back.” (pg. 44 *The Leader as a Mensch* by Bruna Martinuzzi.) This is particularly helpful during times of chaos, change, turbulence and pandemic. Those who have the ability to bend and to stretch will be more proactive, more persistent, and will not abandon hope.

Today, once again we see the strength and flexibility of our reliable God in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The One who was willing to bend down and join us in our humanity takes the time on this Sabbath to heal a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years.

Eighteen years is a long time to be bent over...it is the time it takes a newborn to unfold into adulthood, it is the coming of age in many societies. Luke, the physician, attributes her chronic condition to “a spirit of weakness.” The word for “weakness” can simply mean “illness;” however, her condition can also be indicative of her diminished status within the culture at that time, a culture that continues today in many parts of the world. She is bound up by the limitations and the burdens placed upon her through the customs and the laws.

Jesus heals her by the laying on of hands, an act of blessing and consecration. Without words, Jesus is saying to this unsuspecting “daughter of Abraham,” that what was true for the prophet Jeremiah is true for her. *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you.* Upon receiving the blessing, *immediately she stands straight and praises God.* Those gathered witness the unfolding of her life as she is raised up to wholeness.

As the story unfolds, we learn that what is almost as important as the healing itself is the fact that Jesus heals on the Sabbath, bending the rabbinic law. In this valiant act Jesus announces that the suffering of a fellow human being takes precedence over obligations related to keeping the Sabbath. The same law that limited healing on the Sabbath allowed for the loosening of tethered animals so that they could drink water.

The synagogue ruler who is “bent out of shape” over this healing has turned a religious observation intended to honor the liberation of God’s people into a means of social control and oppression. On Jesus’ last Sabbath visit to a synagogue, he fulfills the prophecy he read during his first visit: *God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free...* By healing a person held captive on the Sabbath, Jesus offers freedom and wholeness in the unfolding of this woman’s life and gives the religious leaders an opportunity to recover their sight and see the absurdity and cruelty of unbending

laws. The woman is stretched by the new possibilities before her; however, the religious leaders remain bent on rigidity.

During this year's Steadfast Neighbor Week, my brother Barry who came to serve with us, Peter, and I rewatched the 1999 movie "Cider House Rules," based on John Irving's 1985 novel. The Supreme Court ruling to reverse Roe vs. Wade had just been announced and we were feeling a need to revisit this thoughtful story which highlights the intricacies and complications around unplanned pregnancies.

The setting of the story is a Maine orphanage during the 1940's which is run by Dr. Wilbur Larch, a skilled physician who delivers the babies of single women that come and go quickly, passing through the night. He and his team then lovingly care for the children left behind. Conditions at the orphanage are sparse, yet the children are loved, given respect, lifted-up, and become an extended family. Each night after reading to and praying with the boys, Dr. Larch leaves them with these words, "Goodnight you Princes of Maine, you Kings of New England." Like Jesus' affirmation of the bound-up woman, Dr. Larch affirms and blesses these orphaned boys, reminding them they, too, are beloved children of God.

Dr. Larch also ends pregnancies in secret for the women who request it because he has seen the tragic consequences that can unfold when people do not have options. "Cider House Rules" reminds us how complicated life can be and gives us pause about rigid, morality-based rules which, like the first century sabbath laws, are often unbending, oppressive, and unjust.

My friends; let us take heart in the good news of today's scripture! To those of us who are bound up and bent over in whatever our circumstances may be, Jesus offers freedom, blessings, and wholeness.

And, to those of us who are in positions of authority, Jesus calls us into accountability and invites us to bend and to create communities where people's lives can unfold into wholeness. The community that nurtures freedom is not one without laws and rules. These provide boundaries that free people to live and work together with dignity. However, Jesus calls us to challenge, change, and bend unfair or oppressive laws.

The wisdom articulated in this gospel story is especially relevant in these times of polarization within our own government, where the give and take, the strength and flexibility, the bending and stretching of democracy is lacking. These attributes are essential in the governing of our communities and the unfolding of our lives.

As the carefree days of summer wind down and we return to the routine of school and church life, may we honor the God who bends and stretches, the God who is both strong and flexible. May God give each of us the strength and flexibility to bend without breaking in the challenges before us, the wisdom to live with humility and reverence, and the courage to reach beyond the law in our care for one another. By the grace of God, may we do the work we were created, called, and consecrated to do, in the unfolding of our lives. Amen.