

Text: Lk. 13:10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And 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. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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." ¹⁵But 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? ¹⁶And 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?" ¹⁷When 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.

It was about 200 years ago, about harvest time, harvest time in Scotland. A mouse was doing what it ought to have been doing. It was building a winter home, hollowed out beneath the soil, lined with little flecks of fur and grass, a little grainary of seeds and nuts to tide it over. But along came a poet, not just any poet but a poet with a plow, turning over the soil and turning over the mouse nest. The mouse scurried, the nest blew to the wind. From that little drama the poet—Robert Burns—wrote “The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley.” Oft astray.

True, always Our faith is a faith of surprises. God is not bound by normal expectations.

- Take the creation. Out of all the emptiness, life is here, breathing, thinking, loving. surprise creates awe and leads to praise.
- Take the story of the slaves in Egypt. Normal expectations? They can never break loose from their powerful oppressor. They live bent over in labor and hopelessness. Yet, God sends Moses to surprise them with freedom.
- Take the forty year journey in the wilderness. Normal expectations? This is a place of death. Yet, God give manna and quail and dew. Surprise? Of course.
- Take the crucifixion of Jesus. Normal expectation? Hatred, denial, death, torture have the last word. Yet, God raised Jesus from the dead. Surprise, even to his closest followers. Jesus repeats the theme of bound and freedom in today's reading. Or bound by Satan. Bound, I think, is being closed to surprise, that God can't or won't act.

Are we open to God's surprises? No matter where we look, events are so uncertain that we truly wonder what will come out of them. What is happening to our earth? What will that mean to future generations? These events are so complex. The traditional answers the church is tempted to give. One: if you all took the Bible more seriously and followed its rules, you'll be ok. Two: just calm down. God will fix it in time. Trust God. Just wait for things to sort themselves out. Jesus is neither a law giver or a fairy godmother. Rather, Jesus is God's presence here in our world, for you, already! God's work is to break through our bondage to know it, see it, and to rejoice in it.

I was in Eisenach, our sister city and sister congregation, St. George, in early June. On Friday, we visited the deaconess mother house and sat at a table with Sister Eberhardt. Tomorrow is a special day, and you have to be there, she insisted. As a deaconess she had lived through 45 years of difficulty in East Germany. Few resources. She was encouraged to go to the west, to get out of Dodge. But... In 1989, that harsh, repressive police state government

simply dissolved. That was a surprise. A year later the church revived what we might call Lutheran Social Services... diakonisches Werk in the state of Thuringia. The historic St. George church is a major tourist attraction. When we arrived at the door just as the service was to start, groups of tourists were milling outside. They couldn't go in and look at historic things. I had to laugh at the irony of what an annoyed woman said: "We can't go in," she said in a huff, "and it's Saturday, why the church need to use it today." That Saturday Jean and I walked into the most unusual German church service we'd ever attended. The pews were filled with the handicapped and their caretakers, the aisles with wheelchairs, not too well dressed families with children, it was, in short, close to chaotic. But they were there to rejoice together that no life is unimportant to God. The series of speakers hit the same point: For over 40 years, the value of life was based on its value to the government. What can a mentally or physically handicapped child produce? Nothing. So why should they be a priority for money and care? They weren't. Why should the old and sick be anything more than a burden on resources? They weren't. But when the church assumed care, Jesus Christ was present, the dignity of Jesus was present and visible in every one who needed care. To surprise those who think no one cares about them. It's no wonder that Sister Eberhardt wanted that story told. The historic St. George church is a major tourist attraction.

It's the same with our gospel reading, Jesus used that gathering to do God's work.

Just look at the surprises, maybe we could say shocks, that Jesus creates in the synogogue. The focus the surprise is a bent over woman who has been locked in her condition for 18 years. The community has cared for her but healing has not happened. Our nation started the war with Iraq a few years ago with the phrase "Shock and Awe." The huge magnitude of exploding bombs, the brilliant flash of rockets, the waves of superior military might were meant to kills, demoralize and quickly defeat. It's the other way around with Jesus. The surprises, the shocks meant to open our eyes....open our eyes to see what God is doing in love....and be full of awe.

Jesus does just that the synogogue. Surprise and praise. Shock and awe. The woman is surprised, even shocked and she responds in awe. But shocks are rumbling all over the place.

- Jesus speaks to the woman. She's not just a woman, but a woman bent over. Jewish men did not speak to women. Women did not speak to men in public. The woman obeyed the rule. She didn't say anything to ask for a cure. Yet Jesus surprises everyone, shocks them by entering into her world.
- He calls her to the center of the synogogue. Again, shocking behavior. She's not supposed to be where he asks her to be. No more focus on the preaching and teaching. NO more focus on the scrolls. What good is that if there is no compassion? Compassion has to be at the heart of God's people.
- He touches her, which code of holiness. That is the code which protected men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness. Here Jesus blows apart the idea that God is so high and pure that God can't be bothered with us, with our hurts, with our sins. God is willing to be scandalized..
- He calls her "daughter of Abraham," a radical term never before found in any 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. Jesus explodes the idea that there are insiders and outsiders. Only humans in need of grace

- He heals on the Sabbath, the holy day. God's compassion for people over ceremony, and reclaims the Sabbath for the celebration of God's endless goodness. We'd say, well, she has suffered for 18 years, what's a few more hours.
- Jesus –like elsewhere-- challenges the belief that her illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. He asserts that she is ill, not because God willed it, but because there is evil in the world. In other words, bad things happen to good people. Jesus does not take time to explain why. Rather, he acts. As the woman stands straight, leader is the one who ends up becoming bent. Rejoice in the healing of others. He refuses to be surprised.
- Everyone experienced empowerment. They all rejoiced. They were all set free from the bondage of a tradition that placed more importance on keeping the law than on responding to needs of human being. When the bent-over woman was healed, they all stood straighter. Indeed, no healing is without its positive social side effects for the entire community. Every life restored by God is a hint from God about why this church is here.¹

A few years ago a doctor by the name of Michael Powell, wrote this about his medical work: “ I considered myself one of the best and the brightest. Having just left a prestigious residency and fellowship program, I thought I was honed to a fine medical edge. ” He wanted to succeed. Part of his vision of success was to use his skills for those who were likely to get better. He knew the trap of complex, hopeless situation on his time and also his reputation. He set sort of a law for himself in his practice. Work where you can do the most visible good, was his law

He wrote: “Nevertheless, I violated that law one day. I stepped over a wheelchair, opened the treatment room door and met John. He was a referral from a colleague, I was silently furious because John, age 14, had cerebral palsy, was painfully deformed and was extremely ill. He had been abandoned by his parents at an early age, knew few friends and lived in a foster home. And there he was now in my treatment room. John also had widespread cancer. During the next year, numerous and prolonged hospitalization were required to keep him partially comfortable. He never complained and showed uncommon courage; nonetheless, his care became an increasing ordeal. Finally, after a particularly frustrating day for the two of us, John grabbed my arm and said, ‘I’m sorry to be such a burden to you.’ That night he died. I’ve never forgotten John and the lesson he taught me. He taught me that there was more to me than I gave myself credit for being. He taught me that giving my best is to become my best. He taught me that life is full of opportunities to become more. And to think I almost missed it.” He started his medical practice thinking about cures, with John he got to start it again in the name of healing, making sense of life.

Powell could have read Burns poem. *The best laid plans of mice and men go oft astray.* He could have delved into the story of Jesus and maybe even seen Jesus’ body in the body of John. The fact is that life will twist and turn, life will surprise and life will shock. God’s promise in Jesus is that God will be there not just to get us through but to help us grow. I think Michael Powell entered that treatment room as stooped over as the woman in the synagogue. But John

¹ Jesus violation of community and religious expectations is an insight from Walter Wink’s book *Engaging the Powers* (1994).

4 Sermon for August 21-22 2010 Luke 13:10-17 St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

untwisted his body so that the end he could stand up straight. For us, too, instead of being bent over, we can stand up in awe that God breaks all the rules to walk with us. Amen.