

"Freedom Story"

11th Sunday after Pentecost - August 21 - Luke 13:10-17

Any good story has a beginning, a middle and an ending, (of course), but it also needs good characters. And when you have characters that you can relate to, and cheer on, and cry about, then a very good story becomes a great story.

Often, a great story begins with a simple detail, and then opens up so that it is told in ever-widening circles, not unlike what happens when a pebble is dropped into water and causes circles that radiates out from the pebble's small point of entry. For example, the Bible is full of stories that begin with a single detail. (In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth; a man had two sons; there was a wedding in Cana, of Galilee...) Or today, "Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath...'

The storyteller is Luke, and he has a special heart for themes of the Kingdom of God. He begins with Mary, who sang a freedom song called *The Magnificat* - the one we sing whenever we gather for Holden Evening Prayer. Then (because Mary sang that song) her son, Jesus, echoed it in his teaching. When he began his ministry, he read from the scroll of Isaiah, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim **release to the captives and...to let the oppressed go free.***"

Then, with all eyes on him, Jesus began to teach. "*Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" Mary's song and Jesus' agenda both described the Kingdom of God as freedom, and from then on we got to see him put those words into action. Jesus was the pebble, dropped into the water of our story, and his words began to move outward. Today, we see Jesus teaching in another synagogue. He is on his way to Jerusalem, and we know what will happen there.

The first wave begins when the character known as "the Bent Over Woman" enters the synagogue. Recall what you know about women during this time. Simply put, they had no social status, because women were not men. While they were allowed in the synagogue, they were not expected to keep the Law. So, imagine what it must have taken - the energy, the courage - for that woman to come to worship that day! Bent over double for 18 years, she would not have been able to slide into the back pew unnoticed. But she tried to be inconspicuous, and then Jesus saw her.

I used to wonder if Jesus would have stooped down like an adult to a child to speak to her, or would he lean over and lift her face to him. But the story says he was **teaching**, and so he would have already been seated, perhaps even below her eye level. He calls her over **to him** - right in the center of the worship - away from the edge, the sidelines - right to the focal point, **next to him**. And when he laid his hands upon her, she who was "*quite unable to stand up straight*" (v 11,) "*stood up straight*" (v 13) and for the first time in 18 years she stretched her arms out wide to praise God. What circles of joy flowed out from her for the rest of her life? What a story she had to tell from that one tiny moment in time!

But there were others there that day, often overlooked. This was the 2nd wave beginning. One was the leader of the synagogue, and to understand his response, you need to know about the two ways leaders looked at "Sabbath." Originally Sabbath-keeping echoed the Creation story in the first chapter of Genesis: "*on the seventh day, God rested from the work that he had done.*" Sabbath-keeping meant a day of rest, a day with no work. It had become **the** symbol of faith - **the** pinnacle of keeping the Law.

However, in Deuteronomy 5:15, Sabbath is connected to the Exodus: *“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out...with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God **commanded you** to keep the sabbath day.”*

So, it was especially appropriate to free this daughter of Abraham, this Jewish woman of the People of Israel, on the day commanded to be kept as a freedom celebration! But the leader was *indignant*. Was his understanding of Torah so focused on the letter of the law that he had forgotten the spirit of the law? Did he fear a challenge to his position by a new rabbi who had come to town with power to exorcise demons? Did he see a future as “unemployed?” We don’t know. But Jesus’ rebuke to the leaders, *Hypocrites!* is as offensive to the men’s fear as Jesus’ healing of the woman was offensive to the demon that had held her captive. What circles might have rippled out from these men as they took time to talk, to study and to pray about what they just saw? What stories would the synagogue leaders be telling for the rest of *their* lives?

Think about something this week: What if freedom comes at the cost of your deepest convictions being completely and utterly wrong? Can you imagine yourself bent over with cares and burdens and never entertaining the possibility that you might become healthy again? Can you imagine how releasing these two different kinds of captives brought out anger and fear in those who had much to lose, and praise and joy in those who had nothing to gain?

The last wave in this story is the crowd, to which we belong. *“All his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”* So, can you point to the wonderful things God is doing all around you; how can you participate in the releasing others from bondage into new freedom? Where does your story connect with today’s characters?

Right here in the waters of baptism, where God came to you and called you into the center of worship, where you were given the power to put flesh on the word, to release the captives, to free the oppressed - and right there (cross) where you were forever freed from the power of sin and death. Jesus did that. And that’s our story...

Now we will hear some other stories from our community. Perhaps you will hear some echoes of liberation and freedom in their words. Perhaps you will only hear the joy of new experiences – of the abundant life in God. Perhaps these stories will connect with your story in ways you never imagined. So, let’s take a listen. (Rachel and the High School trippers share about their summer trip)

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