



Why Doesn't God Just Heal Everyone?

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bek

Proper 16, Year C

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In today's sermon we'll learn about synagogues and sabbath and how they were understood during the time Jesus lived among us. We'll take a look at this morning's gospel lesson and consider why the synagogue leader was indignant when all Jesus did was heal this poor woman. We'll discover some things we can learn from this story and then end with this important question, "When we offer our prayers and ask for healing, why doesn't God just heal everyone? Why are some healed while others continue to suffer?" That's where we're headed, let's get started.

A little background information on synagogues

In English we say "synagogue," in the original Greek, it was "soonagogay" which meant "a place of meeting". A synagogue is an assembly of Jewish men that gathered every Sabbath and feast day as well as on the second and fifth days of the week in order to offer prayers, and to hear and study scripture.

Synagogues seem to date back to the time of the Babylonian exile when Jews were separated and unable to worship in the temple in Jerusalem.

In Jesus' time, every town that had a significant number of Jews would have had at least one synagogue. Women sat in a separate section and were not to participate. A quorum of ten men were needed to form a synagogue and services could not begin until 10 adult males were present.

Synagogue services from that time appear to have had five parts: prayers, psalm-singing, blessings, readings from the Scriptures, and commentaries on the sacred passages. That's very similar to the first half of our church services today – the part of the service we call the Liturgy of the Word.

Now, some background on Sabbath.

There are two different ways that Sabbath observance was understood in the Old Testament. The first focused on resting. Because, on the seventh day, God rested, the Sabbath is observed as a holy day of rest.¹ The second understanding comes from the recital of the ten commandments in Deuteronomy 5 where the people are commanded to observe the Sabbath in recognition of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt.²

¹ Genesis 2:2-3

² Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Remembering that they, themselves, were once slaves was important. With that in mind, the Sabbath becomes a great equalizer, a day of social justice. They were to remember and to afford everyone the opportunity to rest and observe the Sabbath: men, women, children, slaves, foreigners, even animals were to be given the day off from their labors.

This understanding goes beyond the simple need for rest and emphasizes the practice of holiness. Following this understanding, on the Sabbath day, people may undertake holy work and actively practice their faith.³

Next, let's look at this week's gospel lesson – Luke 13:10-17

This particular story of healing is found only in the gospel of Luke. The first line tells us where we are and what is happening, "Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath." That's when a woman came in, a woman who had been bend over and unable to stand up straight for eighteen years. Jesus saw her and called her over, laid hands on her and, our reading this morning says, "immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." In the Greek it says he laid hands on her, "as she was straightened up." It assumes God as the agent; the one who straightened her up.⁴ So, Jesus laid his hands on her as God straightened her up and immediately she began praising God.

Jesus summoned the power of God and the woman was healed. As she expressed her joy at this amazing healing and shouted her praises to God, the leader of the synagogue became very upset, indignant.

The woman healed in our gospel lesson this morning was enslaved by her disability, crippled and unable to stand up straight. As God freed the people from slavery in Egypt, Jesus freed her from this painful and debilitating condition. This is in keeping with the second understanding of Sabbath, the day during which all are set free.

So, why was the synagogue leader so upset by this healing? We assume he must have followed the first understanding of how to observe the Sabbath. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day,"⁵ he said.

Jesus showed that it is not strict or blind observance that God desires, but that we should thoughtfully consider all that we do and always be willing to help, to serve and to do God's work in the world.

³ Bartlett, David L.; Barbara Brown Taylor. *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16)* (Kindle Locations 13883-13889). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

⁴ "Commentary on Luke 13:10-17 by David Schnasa Jacobsen." *Luke 13:10-17 Commentary by David Schnasa Jacobsen*. N.p., n.d. Web. 15 Aug. 2016.

⁵ Luke 13:14

What can we learn from this gospel lesson?

How can it make a difference on our journey of faith? Perhaps we should consider, how much time we spend bent over, looking only at the earth? How difficult it is for us to raise our heads and look to the heavens, seeking God, praising God, and holding on to the promises of the kingdom we have been given! How many people do we know whose lives have been crippled by anger, grief, prejudice, arrogance, ignorance and hopelessness? Jesus offers us more.

For the woman in this story, Jesus offers healing and God lifts her up. For us, this story is an invitation to look up and see that life and hope are offered by God to all whom God loves – and God loves everyone! So, don't be afraid to stand up straight and look to God to lift you up, to raise your spirits, to give you hope.

Which brings us to the question we started with

“When we offer our prayers and ask for healing, why doesn't God just heal everyone? Why are some healed while others continue to suffer?”

This woman didn't even ask for it, and she was healed. What about so many who suffer but are not cured, are not freed?

This is a touch question. We seek and search and read and pray but, like the synagogue leader, we may not always understand. We don't know why God chooses to heal some in this world but, through the teachings of Jesus, we know that all will be healed in the next. Meanwhile, we need to open our eyes, hands, hearts and lives to accept and welcome those who seem different because, in God's eyes, we are all the same. We are all beloved children. .

We too need to remember that our ancestors in the faith, as well as far too many of our fellow Americans, were once slaves themselves. And still today so many are trapped in the ugly and evil practice of human trafficking.

Every Sabbath reminds us of the equality of all people in the eyes of God – everyone gets a day of rest; even the children, the slaves, the foreigners and the animals, because all are of beloved by God.

Through this story of healing Jesus provides for us a glimpse into the kingdom through which comes hope. Why doesn't God free everyone, heal everyone, fix everything? The answer is, I don't know. What I do know is that those who are in need of healing, those who are enslaved, those who are in pain, and fear, and wrestle with whatever challenge they face in their lives, they are no less beloved by God than anybody else.

I also know that often healing does come, but not in the ways we were expecting. You don't have to receive healing and live a perfect life to know you are loved by God. God

doesn't just love the healthy, the seemingly perfect, those who can stand up straight or hear well, or see clearly, or pull themselves out of depression, or escape that which enslaves them, or stop having cancer, or remember who they are as beloved children. God loves us in our imperfection, our disabilities, our pain, our grief and in our times of darkness.

The grace of God is not only manifest through healing, sometimes it is to be made manifest through us. Through our loving, our caring, our giving and our serving the world in the God's name.

We are called to pray for ourselves, for one another and for the world. Sometimes God will send healing, sometimes God will send us. We are to be agents of love in the world and, since we can't always facilitate acts of remarkable healing, we must also look for other ways to help people experience the love of God.

We can do this by sharing the gospel, by sitting with those who mourn, by visiting those who are weak, sick or afraid. When we bring help and hope to the world, we open a window to the kingdom of God and let people catch a glimpse of what is to come. And in some ways, that may be better than physical healing because it offers more than a moment of God's grace, it offers an ongoing connection with a loving community sent to help usher in the kingdom of God. It offers a glimpse at an eternity of all that God intends for us.

So, remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Remember that all are entitled to a break, some rest from their labor, because all are loved by God. And remember that, when we leave this place, after we have been inspired by scripture, embraced by this community, and fed with spiritual food, the bread and wine made holy, we are to go forth to shine as the Light of Christ in the world. It's up to us to make a difference!

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**