

**St. Mark's Episcopal Church**  
**Albuquerque, NM**  
**Sunday August 25, 2019 Proper 16C**  
**Text Luke 13: 10-17**  
**Theme: Theology that Gives Life.**

*The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art  
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.*  
~ T.S. Eliot

I've had some very engaging conversations with people who are making a move into the Episcopal Church from another faith tradition. Often people say they want to be in a place where their values are honored and shared, where their children will learn values that are consistent with what they actually think and feel to be true. They are hoping to avoid theological dissonance where their children are being taught at church something they feel the need to un-teach at home. They want to have their children experience a church where women can be leaders and are invested with authority and respect. They want to be part of a community in which their LGBTQ+ brother and sisters are fully accepted and involved in ministry and leadership. Sometimes they simply want to be a part of a worshiping community where joy and theological inquiry are the hallmarks instead of guilt and moralistic rules.

At the core of these conversations they are not looking for an easy theology but rather that they are looking for something that is life-giving, demanding and joyful. Many of us in this place are in recovery from theologies of our childhood. We were part of religious communities that while often loving and caring were also harsh and damaging to us as we grew a matured. I know many of your stories. I know that some of you were asked to leave your faith communities once you were able to give voice to who you really were as a child of God. That rejection by a faith community was devastating and it is no small miracle that you are still interested in the life of faith and the church. It is amazing that God's love has been able to overcome the damage that, "spiritual people," even well-meaning spiritual people can do in their blindness and narrow understanding of God's wild grace.

The gospel story today takes us into such contested territory. Jesus is in the synagogue teaching on the Sabbath. A woman who has been suffering for many years enters the synagogue. We live in a medically saturated society. So immediately we would like to find a diagnosis for the woman. Is it disk degeneration, osteoporosis, a spinal cord injury? Even if we believe the God in Jesus is capable of

working this miracle, we wonder how were the damaged nerves or bones repaired? However, that is not actually the concern of this story.

The story is an event that stirs up a theological conversation in the synagogue concerning Jesus' mission, the synagogue's understanding of women and both their theologies of Sabbath. Jesus' actions toward the woman create tension and inject powerful questions into the religious life surrounding him. As is usual Jesus' actions and words create an opportunity for growth and transformation that not everyone is ready to embrace.

The healing of the woman in the synagogue is a kind of enacted parable. Her condition symbolizes a burdensome theology that bends her over and cripples her while Jesus' healing of her demonstrates a new way of thinking about God that frees her and releases her to participate in the life of the community. **All Gospel miracles are meant to function as encouragements to ponder God's relationship with people as a guide to how people should relate to one another.** The way we think about God reveals what we think about the intention and nature of God. The human mind and heart are shaped by our inner life and this inner life is a sorting ground for competing ways of understanding the world. Some of these ways give life and some inhibit it, some of these ways save people and some of them destroy, some of them encourage and some devastate human thriving. Our theological approaches are not without impact or importance that is why we gather each week as a community of worship and inquiry where we shape a corporate theology together that we hope is life-giving and stretching and demanding and beautiful.

This sermon is not about the evils of the synagogue theology and the beauty of Jesus' theology though one could simplistically try to take it that way. This sermon is about calling into question our own theologies and what kinds of fruit they bear in the world and within our community life.

Consider this interpretation of this healing miracle of Jesus. The appearance of the woman "just then" in the synagogue is manifesting something that the inner spirit of the theology of Jesus' day did to women. Her bent-over condition reflects the general tendencies of a religion that uses its theology and rules to oppress people rather than to liberate them. Earlier in Luke Jesus has said, "For you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them (Luke 11: 46)."

Jesus' response to the woman is remarkable. First, he calls her to him making her visible. This recognizing of the woman within the synagogue is a corrective to the latent function of a theological perspective that subordinates women to men, thus making them invisible. Her physical condition, being bent over, is symbolic of not being able to see "eye to eye" with others. When Jesus speaks to her, he breaks the code of men avoiding women in public. It is hard from our cultural perspective of

the 21<sup>st</sup> century to understand how many religious rules Jesus is shattering in his embrace and healing of the woman.

Jesus' address of her as woman is a way of endowing her with status and respect. In the mission of Jesus what was invisible becomes visible, those on the margins are moved to the center of attention. And of course, Jesus goes one step more. He reaches out and touches the woman shattering the theological fears of contamination from what was assumed as the Satan-induced crippled condition of the woman. Jesus will have none of this notion that the woman is bent over as a punishment for her sins or moral failings. Jesus' actions may seem like those of a rebel ignoring the traditions and customs. But Jesus' actions are far more than this, in his talking to her, touching of her, and healing of her he is demonstrating a new theology. He is doing what God has done from the very beginning – what God's life and purpose are all about, freeing people from what oppresses them. What God directed Moses to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" (Exodus 7:16) is what God says throughout history. As our inspiring and deeply grounded Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is known to proclaim, "if it is not loving, liberating and life-giving it is not of Christ."

Of course, the story continues as a kind of warning to all systems and structures that lose sight of what their purpose really is: to give life, to aid in human thriving, to free the captive, to lose what is bound and to heal what is broken. As one commentator said, "The leader of the synagogue is clueless." He says, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured not on the Sabbath day." "His theology is a boa constrictor that has squeezed all the compassion out of him. Instead of rejoicing at the liberation of the woman, he becomes indignant because his theological understanding of the Sabbath has been violated." (Shea)

Jesus' healing on the Sabbath forces the question about the intentions of God for God's world. Jesus points out the flawed theology and practice of the leader and the people are amazed sensing the goodness of God. They will alleviate an animal's thirst on the Sabbath but they will not unbind a woman that has been bound by Satan, who is the enemy of God's purposes. They show more compassion to animals than they do to women.

Our theologies structure our minds and our practices. The way we think about God deeply influences what we believe and how we act in the world.

In this story, the leader of the synagogue's theologically structured mind only allows him to see the stooped woman as a sinner being punished for her sins. While the theological mind of Jesus sees a bent-over daughter of Abraham who needs to stand upright. **Different theologies allow us to see different realities.** In one theology her disease puts her outside of God's loving care. But for Jesus, who sees God as actively restoring creation and renewing his relationship with all of humanity the woman is at the center of God's compassionate care. The way we think about God can be transformative and healing or destructive and debilitating.

There are of course important criteria for evaluating our thinking about God. Is it faithful to scripture and tradition? Is it internally consistent? Is it loving, liberating and life-giving? All theologies have a practical dimension as well when they are living in the minds and actions of their adherents. How does this theology function? What does it permit us to see and what does it obscure? What inner attitudes does our theology allow and validate? What kinds of outward behaviors does our theology encourage?

Theologies have a latent function. The point is that the way we think about God is not really neutral. All theologies have hidden influences that are not always easy to recognize because they are so close to home. It is hard to see or understand at times what kind of people we are becoming because of how we think about God. There is good reason to cultivate a playful but serious suspicion of our own theologies.

I'm sure you've had the experience of someone telling you that they don't believe in God. Often it is enlightening to ask them what the God that they don't believe in is like. It is not unusual for them to describe a God that in the end you can also say along with them, yes, I don't believe in that God either. But let me tell you who the God is that I believe in and what God's loving, liberating and life-giving dream for the world is.

I'm hope I'm making some sense here. Perhaps some examples will help. A theology that emphasizes personal sin may tend to overlook structural injustice in society. A theology that emphasizes the sufferings and death of Christ may drain the joy of creation out of its adherents. A theology that majors on salvation in the afterlife may diminish concern for the struggles of the world here and now. A theology that emphasizes God as a Father may encourage treating women as an inferior gender. A theology that emphasizes the infallibility of the church may encourage religious leaders to hide ecclesial failings. A theology that promises success and wealth may see poverty as the result of faithlessness ignoring the real causes. A theology that emphasizes that there is only one path to salvation may encourage the negative evaluation and disrespect for people on other paths. A theology that emphasizes the flaw of original sin in procreation may lose sight of the sacredness in sexuality. A theology that sees one's own nation as specially blessed by God may encourage a people to demean and discount other peoples in order to maintain their privileged status. A theology that sees only certain kinds of bodies as important may encourage the withholding of compassionate medical care for all of God's beloved. A theology that views children as cute and entertaining may fail to allow them to lead in worship and prayer.

I think you get the picture. As one theologian said it, "**when we hold theologies, our theologies also hold us.**" How we think actually can truly, deeply, madly and lovingly affect how we behave and live in the world.

We all have theological lives conscious or not. Some theologies are pretty easy to see through, fakes can be spotted. “God helps those who help themselves” is really a thinly veiled attempt to validate aggressive instincts that cover for looking out for number one. “God wants you to be rich,” – a rather obvious attempt to make greed and excess a God sanctioned activity that is a sign of blessing.

One way we dupe ourselves is to assume that we can construct a theological life that will only have positive effects on our attitudes and behaviors. It’s such a pleasant dream. However, our social and psychological reality is far too complex for this. **Far better is for us to cultivate a lively sense of inquiry and suspicion in our theological lives.** How does what we believe really function? How is our participation in the faith community of St. Mark’s validating or challenging our own personal theologies? Have you ever allowed Jesus to actually change the way you think?

The life of faith is not intended to validate all your current ways of thinking and behaving. It is intended to woo, convict and invite you into being transformed into Christ-likeness.

We all want to go to church with people who share our values, who think a lot like we do and that is a very normal desire. But perhaps we can say it a little more profoundly; can we desire to go to church with people who are truly open to being transformed into Christ’s likeness, to becoming a deep friend of God? Can we allow ourselves to grow and change so that our faith is not something that constricts or bends people over but is rather the loving, liberating and life-giving way of Jesus?

We need a strong vision of Jesus, one who is willing to challenge our theological positions. In the story of the woman in the synagogue, Jesus heals the woman to be sure, allowing her stand upright with dignity and status. But Jesus also begins the healing of all those in the place of worship by bringing into question their cherished theological assumptions about sin, healing and the Sabbath and replacing them with God’s way of compassion, whose joy is to liberate all who are in bondage. One way of setting people free is to help them question the theological ideas that hold them or others in a kind of bondage and need to be transformed or removed.

Perhaps we need Jesus, to be our theological surgeon, with all his healing arts.

T.S. Eliot’s poem is worth repeating:

*The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer’s art  
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.*

~ T.S. Eliot

We worship a God who is loving, liberating, and life-giving, that is the good news that will lead us into being people who are changed and stretched by the healing art of the living God.