

Year C, Proper 16, Luke 13:10-17 "Woman, you are set free from your ailment"

August 21, 2016

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"Social convention or the Gospel?"

In 1811-12 the worst recorded earthquake in North America east of the Rockies was recorded in New Madrid Missouri. On the Richter Scale it was estimated to be between 7.5-7.9 (Wikipedia). As a result of two plates shifting past one another in opposite directions, fences that were once in a straight line were suddenly dozens of feet apart. The most dramatic sign of the quake was that for a time the Mississippi River ran backwards.

Jesus' words regarding the Sabbath represent an equally unexpected reversal in the face of the conventional wisdom of the day. To make matters more complicated, it's not as though the Leader of the Synagogue was leading people astray. In a literal sense, he is correct that the Sabbath is special and should be treated as such. The Sabbath is one of the fundamental traits of Judaism, and it has remained that way for thousands of years because people have been stubborn about its special place in the ordering of their lives. Yet, his absurd reaction to the healing of the woman reveals that he has unwittingly chosen social convention over the Good News of Jesus. Or to take a snapshot of his spiritual journey, we might observe that he is stuck.

Most of us when we were learning to ride a bike began with training wheels. It's not that we couldn't have learned otherwise, but an intermediary step can be helpful in drawing people in. With all of the new bike lanes and bike paths in town, think how ridiculous it would look if all the bikers were riding around on training wheels. They would be stuck at a very basic level. Take off the training wheels and suddenly the same implement becomes a more dynamic vehicle.

Literal application of religious rules are important when we are first teaching the faith, but they can also be limiting when we fail to take off the training wheels. For various reasons many people don't want to take off the training wheels. Doing so is frightening and threatening, so we stick with what we know. In the long run, however, we deny ourselves the opportunity to grow and flourish. In doing something beautiful for the woman, the crowds are able to recognize what a miraculous thing Jesus is doing. Sadly the leader feels threatened and tries to shut it down. He's not exactly blaspheming, but it does remind me of one the most difficult sayings of Jesus when he speaks of the unforgiveable sin, "¹And everyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven." (Luke 12:10). Discerning when God is "in something" and calling us, as God loving people, to respond may be difficult and challenging, but it's not impossible.

For the past several years I've had the privilege of reading to the first graders at Ella Dolhonde School. One of the books in my usual rotation is called *The Three Questions* by Jon Muth. It is an animated children's book adapted from the original short story "The Three Questions" by Leo Tolstoy. The questions are, "When is the best time to do things?"; "Who is the most important one?"; and "What is the right thing to do?".

All of these questions are at the heart of our struggle to maintain social convention but to do so in a way that doesn't smother the Gospel. It's not that Jesus is unaware of such questions. He has merely transcended them. Jesus is so in touch with God, so cognizant of the flow of God's compassionate love, that he doesn't think twice about social convention before healing the woman. It's the natural thing to do. The leader of the synagogue believes in healing, but only within his own preordained calculus. He is certain that God works in a fixed way, that is on 6 days a week but not on the Sabbath. Such thinking brings God down to our level and is an unconscious attempt to at least limit God's power if not usurp it for ourselves.

One of the things I absolutely love about the Episcopal Church is our tradition. The language, the order, the music all speak to me deeply. The various governing structures help bind us together as a community, but there is no doubt that from time to time we dismiss the activities of God because they are happening outside of our known faith community. Such was the attitude of the Synagogue Leader. Jesus' activities were beyond what he was willing to accept. Remember what the leader forgot- God is a dynamic and loving God and he sent Jesus to us to show us that perfect love. We are invited to gaze on it, internalize it, reflect it, live that love. Such love changes lives, changes the world. The floods just west of us, as awful as they have been, in a strange and bizarre way have brought together a divided community. It is safe to say that charitable love has triumphed.

This past Thursday we celebrated the Lesser Feast of William Porcher Dubose, a priest of the Episcopal Church who taught at the seminary at The University of the South in Sewanee, TN. Shortly before he died in 1918, Porcher wrote this, "God has placed forever before our eyes, not the image but the Very Person of the Spiritual Man. We have not to ascend into Heaven to bring Him down, nor to descend into the abyss to bring Him up, for He is with us, and near us, and in us. We have only to confess with our mouths that He is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised Him from the dead- and raise us in Him- and we shall live" (Holy Men, Holy Women, August 18). *Amen.*