

Unbound

Luke 13:10-17

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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I've noticed a new trend in fund-raising the past few years. And I just *hate it!* You ever walked into a large store, like a WalMart or a Farm Fresh or something like that – you ever walk into one of those places and the first thing you see is *a cage?* It's supposed to be a jail cell! There's usually someone in it; there's a sign on it that says, "We need to raise X amount of dollars so [insert name here] can get out of jail!" The money goes to a charity, somewhere like the Food Bank or Oasis or even CHKD. I suppose it's all in fun, and usually the folks in the cage or jail cell are laughing about it all. But what if it's been a slow day, and not too many people have been by the 'Generosity Jail' there? That poor "prisoner" might be in that thing longer than they wanted to be! In fact, I *have* seen a couple of those folks who looked pretty unhappy. Must have been a slow day. Or maybe they were doing it because they didn't think they could say no, so they were unhappy about it. You know what makes it bad? Once you get in that cell, you don't have a choice; because if you ask out early, what're they gonna say about you? "Well that guy don't care about the poor sick kids at CHKD! He's just a selfish little guy, now isn't he?" You're really stuck!

I get a kick, too, out of those "Scared Straight" shows on cable. Those kids don't have a choice; they're gonna go behind the prison walls, and stay in there until their time is through. Not like a real prisoner – he or she ain't gettin' out until that last part of the sentence has been served. There is an end in sight for these kids. They all look

relieved when the thing reaches the end; a large number of 'em straighten right up. I mean, who would want to voluntarily submit to bondage?

Maybe that's why that "Survivor" series on CBS has lasted so long. We can't imagine sane people actually giving up their freedom and their comforts to go and live like that! You wouldn't catch me running around in a loincloth. Come to think of it, that's probably a good thing for humanity, too. Not enough money in all the world to get me to do that. But these intellectual lightweights, who *do* have a choice, voluntarily submit to this thing, for the money and the fame they think is going to come. Their big thing is *hope* – that they'll hit it big, and be released from the "bondage" of whatever life they were living. That's the hook that draws us in to watch it; we want to see somebody actually get out of their imprisoned life, and make it big. We think maybe that could happen to us. Well, at least, the money part.

So it's really hard when we come up against people who really have no choice. We don't know how to deal with them. We can't imagine what their "prison", the life that seems like bondage, is like. This story from Luke's gospel shows you how bad it had gotten in Jesus' day, how those in authority had forgotten about what it was like to live in bondage.

The scene is familiar - here's Jesus, in the synagogue teaching, on a Sabbath. He could have been teaching any day of the week, because those good folks had Bible studies all the time. They really worked at it! But it was the Sabbath, and that's important. Important, because we know that's the big day, when LOTS of people come to worship. Important, too, in light of what's going to happen in a little while. "Just then

there appeared a woman,” says our text, and that’s good, it catches the thought that in the middle of his teaching, this woman comes in. She had, says the NRSV, “a spirit that had crippled her.” There’s a lot more behind this in the original: this spirit has sickened her, it’s literally “a spirit of weakening,” or maybe “withering.” It’s a spirit that’s slowly making her shrivel up and go away. It’s been working its evil for some 18 years now, we find out, and it’s gotten her quite distorted in her body. NRSV translates that “she was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.” The words in the original literally mean that she had *been* bent, as if by some opposing force, and that she had tried but could not straighten up “in all ways or manners possible.” This evil spirit had fixed her, all right – it had forced her into this position and made it so she couldn’t get out! In other words, she was in bondage to this spirit – and there appeared to be no hope of escape. She was in prison in this body; she didn’t have a choice.

Apparently, there was a touch of “Survivor” in her! Her being there was a challenge and a risk along those lines. Apparently, the woman is quite some distance away. That’s the rules! Women, you know, were always kept at the back of the synagogue or the Temple; it was their expected station in life, rule number 1. Worse, if you were diseased, they thought in those days something was wrong with you spiritually, and you’d be pushed further back - rule number 2. You might even be rudely escorted to the door, and thrown out, maybe even get banned for your presumptuousness in even coming to this holy place. Since, you know, you musta done something bad to earn this pain. Let’s be clear: going to the synagogue that day was like her own version of Survivor: except with a lot bigger stakes.

So this woman was as far away from Jesus as she could be! We can fairly say that she was in bondage to her condition. Would she be a good “Survivor,” and keep going, out of hope? Or would she see the crowds, get discouraged, and just go home?

As if to confirm that she’s far away, Luke uses a word that we rarely see in our New Testament. Jesus προσηφωνησεν; he *calls out* an invitation to her from a distance. When she gets there, he says something that is just remarkable, if you look at it carefully in the original language. The tense is something we don’t have in English, called the *perfect* tense. To translate it properly, you’d have to say, “Woman, you have been healed, you are now healed, and you’re gonna stay healed!” Jesus is talking about a healing *that has already taken place somehow!* Jesus then lays his hands on her. This woman, who could in no way stand up, all of a sudden is standing bolt upright, praising God at the top of her lungs, *continually*, as the imperfect tense in the Greek tells us. About all you can say here is that she must have been healed from the moment Jesus saw her and had mercy on her, had pity on her, wanted to set her free from her prison.

In other words, her release from prison, her “unbinding,” had already happened the moment she made up her mind to go to Jesus. Jesus isn’t being cute or funny when he says “You *have been* healed” in the original. By the time she knows it, the thing has already been done.

That’s exactly like it is for you and me. We haven’t yet laid eyes on Jesus, not directly, not like the people in our Bible passage got to. But we’ve already been healed! Healed, because like this woman we have reached out to the one who we know can

heal. There shouldn't have been any dispute about that in Jesus' day; his fame as a healer who could be trusted was already widespread. There shouldn't be any dispute in our day, either. Only someone imprisoned in their unbelief, captive to the ways of the world, could not see, and reach out, and be healed.

But of course, this early in Luke's gospel, there's going to be a controversy, and it comes to us in the person of the leader of the synagogue. Before we get to hear that the crowd is roaring and cheering the miraculous healing they've just seen, this *buzz-killer* runs to the front and starts makin' a scene. He has some rules to go by, and this guy Jesus has broken one of the biggest ones. I mean, everyone knows you're not 'sposed to work on the Sabbath, right? Well, healing is working! Says so right in the Pharisees' rules! So this synagogue leader is – well, what is he? I find it interesting to look at Luke's choice of words here. He uses the word ἀγανακτῶν, which means “indignant” or “displeased” or “unhappy” in a social sense. Not real anger over real injustice. No, this leader is frosted because his rules, his beloved *rules*, have been broken! He *keeps* barking out an order, which is what we get from the original language here: “come on the other days and be healed, not on the Sabbath!” He was trying to *control* the pandemonium that was about to break out, because what would people say if he didn't?

You know what? That was his prison. The whole system of laws; and when you could do things and when not; and what was good to do and what was not; and how you could make judgments about who was going to heaven and who wasn't – all those rules, they were a *prison*. By the time of Jesus, the rules, commonly known as “The

Law”, had made sure that life as a good Jew was lived in a particularly binding way. You were always examining yourself, to see if YOU were obeying all those *rules*. You looked at others to see if they were breaking ‘em; if they were, you couldn’t be with those folks! It meant that you lived in a sort of prison – different from the one this woman had lived in, but still, a prison. With, very little hope, I might add. Because no one could ever obey the whole Law.

But go back to the things God said in Exodus and Leviticus about what his people should do, and you find much about caring for the sick and the poor. You find a lot of common sense. Jesus told many parables like the Good Samaritan, for example, to point out how the people had killed off God’s intentions by their stupid, self-serving *rules*. He had a way, Jesus did, of cutting through the junk and getting right to the problem. And so he does, with this leader.

“All right, hypocrites!” he begins, and then he asks them all questions that the original construction lets us know, is a question that expects only a “yes” answer. “Don’t you, on the Sabbath, unbind your ox or donkey and lead it away to drink water?” Well, you got ‘em there, Jesus! That’s not about work, that’s about preserving life – something God’s all about. It’s about mercy, too: doing for the animals what they couldn’t do for themselves. You’re in charge of making sure that they stay alive! God’s *people* need to be in charge of taking care of other people. And then the clincher. “And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan *bound* for eighteen long years, be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?” The irony is delicious: Your old rules say “No work on the Sabbath!” You’ll *unbind* your donkey or ox to give them water, which the Law

allows! – but you won't *unbind* this woman from Satan? You'd show mercy to an animal, but not to one of your own? You see how being imprisoned distorts your point of view? What is the Fourth Commandment, people? "Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy." Wouldn't releasing this woman from bondage be "remembering" it in the best way?

Luke reports that the crowd really enjoyed this: his opponents "were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing." I bet some of them felt a bit imprisoned by the oppressive rules of their leaders! Jesus was showing them a way out of spiritual jail.

But there's one more irony: many, if not most, in the crowd wouldn't in the end let themselves be "unbound" from The Rules, not really; and when it came down to choosing between Jesus or the rules, Jesus would go to the cross. They chose their own prison, their own bondage; unlike *Survivor*, there wasn't going to be any payoff in the end. And unlike *Scared Straight*, there was nothing learned, no behavior was changed, except for the few who became disciples.

You and I, today, have to guard against our desire to live in bondage to rules and habits, instead of living as ones who have been set free by the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. Now, good rules help us to be more efficient in what we do, and ought to help us stick to our mission: to be God's people in the world. And we're going to look at some powerful ones in the Ten Commandments very shortly. But if we blindly follow our own old rules, especially if we ignore others who need to be set free, then we imprison ourselves. And it *won't* be for a good cause, like those supermarket cages.

See, we're like those people who gleefully get into those fake jails. Our "jail" isn't a jail at all! – as some would call being a Christian. We're willing to sacrifice ourselves for others, so they can have what God wants them to have. We're NOT like those kids who have to be "Scared Straight" – because we've been motivated to live free and joyously, and to help others live that way, too. And we don't have to do ridiculous things like those Survivor folks, in order to gain a big reward. Our Lord has already taken care of all that for us; we already know we have the reward of eternal life.

So I say to everyone: don't be bound by old rules, old ways of thinking. You are *already* unbound – from the things that could keep you bent, and twisted, and distorted, unable to live the life God wants for you. You have already been shown mercy, and healed, and set free, by Jesus Christ. So stand up tall! – and give thanks to God for the wonderful things God is doing.