

Grace

A Sermon by Rev. Joe Hoffman

March 11, 2007

Text: Luke 13:10-17

It was some years ago when a woman began attending a church I was serving in another city. She was very quiet – not engaging at all. Kept her distance. Just on the edge of the community. After several weeks she called and asked to come and see me.

She told me her story. She described to me a very broken spirit in her – one that had to do with being abused, but I think there was even more going on than that. I tried to help her. I tried to refer her to professional therapists and doctors who were so much more skilled to help. I tried to connect her with agencies that offered shelter and care for people who were struggling as she was. But she was unable to accept any of my advice. She was not hostile or belligerent – but simply did not have the capacity in her to help herself. I marveled that she found the courage to even come and talk with me.

Finally, a director of an agency in town told me – after I had called asking her help yet again – that I could not fix this for this woman. That this woman had to do the work. It was a hard reality for me to accept.

There are people who come to church or to a faith community when they have nowhere else to go. When they don't know what else to do. They come to us. They are part of us. Sometimes they are way out on the edge – can only get close enough to participate from a distance. Sometimes they become very involved with us – and keep their broken places well hidden. Sometimes they have been to all the professionals possible – and yet healing and wholeness have eluded them. Sometimes they know what is broken and hurting, and sometimes they haven't a clue. Sometimes they are other people – and sometimes they are us.

A woman went to worship on the Sabbath day. She was bent over and stooped as she was every day and had been for 18 years. We don't know how often she came to worship, but she seemed to be known by the people. She happened to come on the same day as Jesus – we don't know if they had ever met before or not. What we know is this – the woman did not initiate any part of the encounter with Jesus. She did not confess faith in Jesus. She really only came to worship. Jesus approached her, spoke healing words, touched her, and made her well. And then this woman praised God.

Sometimes a healing just comes. She had been bent over for 18 years – which was about half the expected life span for a woman of those days. That's a long time to be bent over. I am sure she had given up hope of being well. Wouldn't you? But Jesus saw her and had compassion on her, and Jesus gave her the wholeness she did not know how to find any other way.

That is the power we have in our midst. The power to find a way when there seems to be no way. And that power is not something we can force. It comes when it will. We never know who might be the presence of Christ to someone else. We never know when God's spirit might break into our day, into our service, into our routines, and change our lives. We come because we seek such a presence. All of us come for that reason – whether we really know it or not. All of us are broken. All of us are bent down. All of us have hurts we can't fully name, that we don't know how to heal, all of us. And all of us are in need of God's grace.

This woman met Grace in the presence of Jesus.

The priest of course said it was wrong. It didn't fit in with the rules for Sabbath. You know what I think that is about. I think that some of us become misguided. We have felt the call to be an agent of God's love. Our desire is genuine. And sometime we get sidetracked with a need for power and to have authority – often in order to protect some broken part in ourselves. It is hard when we have a plan, when we have a ritual and way of worshipping together, it is hard when the spirit of Grace breaks in and stirs things up.

We get so used to the routine and ritual – so much so that we begin to expect God to follow our rituals too. When we do that, we begin to assume that we are God ourselves. And that is always trouble. It is a slippery slope to be a vessel of the holy without beginning to think we are the Holy.

Jesus countered the priest – in a very direct way. You hypocrites – which also includes the other religious leaders. The law allows you to untie an animal and lead it to water to drink on the Sabbath. If the law allows this, then how can we not only allow but celebrate when we can free a daughter of Sarah and Abraham from their captivity and let them drink from God's holy spring.

I know that being a person in authority means always being aware that we might be wrong. Always trying to be open to when and where God's grace breaks forth. It is hard. I have some empathy for the religious leaders in this story. I know their place in the story, because it has been a role I have taken on at times myself. But Jesus comes to free them as well as to heal this woman. Jesus calls us all to a life of liberation and love.

Laura was a saint in the church in Atlanta. The educational wing had been named in her honor, and each week she would sit at the door and greet all who entered with her cheerful and accepting smile. When they found the cancer, she was in her 80's, but still it caught all of us off guard. I went to visit her in the hospital. As I was leaving, a man entered her room that I did not know. I introduced myself, and he said he was Laura's son. I then knew that he was a psychiatrist, and that recently he had run into trouble and his credentials had been taken away from him. I didn't know the details.

He looked tired and confused. He looked broken. I assumed this was grief, and I reached out and gently laid my hand on his shoulder. He began to weep. We stepped into the hall

so we could talk, and do you know what he said to me. He said – you have no idea how many years it has been since someone touched me with such care.

We never know how deep our touch will go. I was just trying to comfort him, but my simple touch reached deep into the heart and soul of this wounded man. You just never know.

Jesus comes to set us free. Jesus comes to be the presence of God's grace. Jesus comes to help us be whole. And we as the church are called to do the same for each other as best we can. To be the presence of Christ in whatever way we think we can. And to be open to ways we can't even begin to imagine. As God's spirit moves in our midst.

We are here today – a broken, struggling, hurting people. But we come to find our lives. We come to hear the stories again. We come to be in the presence of the Holy because we are so in need – all of us – all the time – of God's holy grace.

How are you bent over? Where do you need to be touched? How can we help you – how can we help each other – to be open to God's grace in our midst?

That's what we are here for. Thanks be to God.