

Lectionary 21 (C)  
11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
August 25, 2019  
Text: Luke 13:10-17

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Our gospel reading for today offers a powerful image for seeing ourselves—not just individually, but all of us together as the human family, and maybe especially all of us as Americans. Luke tells how Jesus went to the synagogue, where he saw a woman who had been crippled for 18 years—Luke describes her as oppressed by a spirit that weighed her down and bent her over so that she couldn't stand up straight. I can only imagine the pain and difficulty she experienced every day. I can also imagine that, as a person with a disability, she was pretty much invisible to everyone else. But Jesus saw her and called her over. He said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" –free from your affliction. And when he laid his hands on her, she stood up straight and began praising God. This is a story about God's love in action. And we hear it today as a story about God's love flowing to us through Jesus's compassionate touch, setting us free from those afflictions that weigh us down, that distort our lives and rob us of the blessing that God desires this life to be for us.

As I've been thinking about this story this week, I can't escape the connection that the biggest, most powerful oppressive force at work in American society today is the legacy of slavery and racism. I just learned a few weeks ago that it was four hundred years ago this month—August 1619—that the first shipload of African slaves arrived in Jamestown, Virginia. The English colonists there purchased 20 to 30 Africans from English pirates, who had stolen them from a Portuguese slave ship. The Portuguese, in turn, had kidnapped the Africans from their homes in the region that is now Angola. The Jamestown colonists put the Africans to work in their tobacco fields, doing the back-breaking labor that would create wealth for the owners. That was the beginning of slavery in what would become the United States. Over the following 250 years, nearly half a million Africans were kidnapped from their homeland and sold as slaves here. It was the beginning of incredible wealth for the English colonies, and then the American states, and the beginning of incredible, unspeakable suffering for those slaves and their descendants.

Slavery has left a mark on us as a nation. It has left us bent over, like the woman in our story, oppressed by a force that has crippled us as a people. And it's not just slavery. We are weighed down by the whole legacy of racism that diminishes our shared life. This summer, I've been learning a lot about racism, and one of the most important things I've learned is that racism is not the same as racial hatred or prejudice. Racism is the whole system of laws and policies and practices and attitudes and beliefs that work to the advantage of white people and to the disadvantage of people of color. Racism is rooted in the idea that one race is better, or smarter, or more capable, more deserving; the idea that people of one race work harder or are more ethical, while people of another race are lazy or violent. Those beliefs produce all sorts of subconscious biases and fears that have infected how we see ourselves and how we relate to each other. All of those things together—the laws and the way they're enforced, the policies that affect how schools are

funded and who can get a loan to buy a house, the attitudes and beliefs about who is deserving or not, the subconscious biases and fears—together all of those things have created entirely different worlds of experience for Americans whose skin is white from the world experienced by Americans whose skin is black or brown. Racism is the malignant spirit that oppresses us and weighs us down so that, as a people, we are unable to stand up straight.

I feel the need to say that we didn't personally create this system of racism that has us as a nation so painfully bent over. We might think of ourselves as unwilling participants in the racism that infects our culture. After all, none of us choose our race, and we didn't create this whole web of racist policies and attitudes that surrounds us. Maybe there are some of us who have a hard time even seeing it. For some of us, maybe racism is mostly invisible. If we are part of the dominant, white culture, we probably experience racism mostly as advantages, not the limits, or fear, or judgments that people of color experience. And if we're white, we might not recognize the more subtle marks that racism leaves on us—whether it's a fear of people who are different, or a diminished sense of empathy, or a kind of defensiveness when it comes to facing the shameful elements of our nation's history.

Remember, though, the story we are reflecting on today—the bent-over woman who was raised up by Jesus to stand and give praise to God—this is a story about healing and new life. This story is not about shame or blame or guilt. And as we hear it, we can also hear the promise of Jesus' power to raise us up to set us free from our affliction so we can stand upright and give praise to God—all of us together. If I were to identify the point in time that we occupy in the story, I think it would be the moment between when Jesus saw the woman and called her over, and when he laid his hands on her and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Jesus' healing power is already at work around us in the efforts of people of all races to create greater understanding and justice. But we still have a long ways to go before we can truly stand up straight, all of us together.

I wonder how you imagine we might experience Jesus' power for healing for us as a nation? For us as a people whose common life is distorted and bent over by the legacy of racism? I imagine it would include immersing ourselves more deeply in Jesus' way of humility and compassion, of confession and forgiveness, of speaking truth and seeking justice. I imagine that experiencing Jesus' power for healing would also lead us to seek Jesus' way of inclusive community and crossing over the boundaries that keep people apart. I am certain that we'll need to return daily to God's grace that is sufficient to cover all our failures and all our sins—not just our individual sins, but also our communal sins. God's overflowing grace is able to bring forgiveness for not just the injustices and cruelty that are part of our common past and present, but also for the apathy and inaction that are part of our past and present. I believe that this is where the Spirit of God is leading us. This is the work that God is giving to us for this time in our life together, especially given how many loud, angry, hateful voices there are around us.

Maybe you remember how, at our Spring Leadership Retreat, we felt moved by God's Spirit to push on our comfort zone, to begin challenging conversations about topics like diversity and race. I believe this is one way for us as a congregation to grow more deeply into our identity as people of God, as the community of Jesus. Our path forward as a congregation includes a lot of listening and learning. For a lot of us, we might feel like we're just beginners at this, and that's OK. You'll be hearing about an all-congregation reading resource in September, and opportunities for discussion. We'll be reading this book, *Waking Up White*, by Debby Irving. There will be resources in the newsletter, and opportunities for reflecting on this journey that we're participating in—a journey toward racial justice. I hope you will receive this as an expression of Jesus' healing touch—because Jesus' healing work is still continuing. The Spirit of the Risen Christ is moving among us to bring healing and wholeness, to raise us up, together with all of God's children, so that we experience this gift of life as a source of blessing and joy. There's no telling where this journey will take us, this learning season, this time for growing awareness. I pray it will help us all be better able to stand and give joyful praise to God. Amen.