

22 August 2010

Pentecost 14 (Proper 21)

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

I used to have a computer that, every so often, it would give me a message: This programme has performed an illegal action and will be shut down. What has it done? What have I done? I don't understand at all. And there's nothing I could do about it; it would shut down. And I would have to start all over again. There are rules, and everything must operate within the rules. No mercy.

Computers, I guess have to work that way. And they are good. But they are precise, and there's no wiggle-room. Part of us assumes that all rules are that way. They must be followed, to the letter of the law. What's the use of them otherwise?

Jesus comes to a synagogue on the Sabbath. He meets a woman bent over. She can't straighten, nor sit, nor stand, nor walk like others. She's different. And she is called not by name, but by her disability. She encounters Jesus, and Jesus cures her. She is no longer bent. She stands up straight.

But there's a problem. This sort of thing isn't supposed to happen - not now. This is outside official office hours. This sort of thing, if it's going to happen, must be done Sunday through Friday - this is Saturday, the Sabbath; it's not supposed to happen; it's against the rules.

Well, we may ask: who's bent? Who can't stand up straight? Someone who's bent can only see their feet and the ground around it; they can't stand up straight and see the whole picture. The leader of the synagogue could only see the rules; he couldn't stand up straight to see the whole picture. Animals get better treatment than what he's prepared to give this woman. What's more important? - the wholeness of this woman; or religious rules? But rules do not regulate G.

Jesus addresses the congregation. And this time he calls her, not by her disability, but "Daughter of Abraham". He welcomes her back to a full and rightful place in the community: "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage?"

She's been cured; but we're seeing more than a cure. She's been healed. (It's not the same thing.) Healing, which may or may not be accompanied by a cure, addresses the spirit and the wholeness of the person. This woman is made whole. Jesus calls her daughter of Abraham. The woman is cured and healed, and she praises God. The perfect Sabbath response to the presence of the Lord on the Sabbath: wholeness and then praising.

We're all bent over in some way. We all stand in need of God's forgiveness and mercy and healing. And we usually have our own ideas, our own rules of how it's going to happen. But the grace of Jesus breaks all the rules we make. God will heal outside of

office hours.

Reading on from the gospel: Jesus continues to talk about the upside down world of the kingdom. (Luke 13:23-30) Someone asks: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Questioner didn't ask how to be saved; or what it means to be saved. Jesus appears to understand question as spiritual pride, something along the lines of: "Exactly with how many other people am I going to have to share the kingdom?" And Jesus gives the image of entering by the narrow door.

It is the image of great crowds thronging front doors of the great house where the banquet is being held. Don't bother with that way; go round the back and slip in through the little door where the kitchen staff go in and out. Seek to enter through the narrow door." Then when the front doors are shut, you'll find yourself inside, and all those important people who were concerned about making a grand entrance will find themselves outside looking in through the windows. But expect to be surprised by the company you'll find yourself in - some of the last people you'd expect. After all, as Jesus said, "some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

The standards of the kingdom are topsy turvy. It's like loving the unlovable; it's like justice for those of whom most would say: "those people don't matter"; it is recognising, in spite of every prejudice of culture, taste and conviction, the value of those whose value we could so easily deny. Oh, how ridiculous!

But those who rely on popular agreeable messages; those who rely on their social position, or on having associated with the Messiah, We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets, these are the ones who are in danger. Those things do not fit with the upside-down world of the standards of the kingdom.

Will those who are saved be few? Wrong question! That's a front door question. The proper place is to go to the back door, where we'll find an astonishing company inside. Who would you, who would I, be amazed to find getting into the banquet first? "But some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last." Amen.

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