

## ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | AUGUST 21, 2022

ISAIAH 58:9B-14 | PSALM 103:1-8 | HEBREWS 12:18-29 | LUKE 13:10-17

A few years ago, I was doing some text study with Rabbi Wajnberg when he was at Beth Rishon. We were reading the burning bush story from Exodus, and Beni stopped and said, “You know what Egypt is in Hebrew, right?” Since my Hebrew is mostly aspirational these days, I replied, “Of course I know. But why don’t you tell me anyway.” And he said, “It’s *mitzrayim*. Which is the word for ‘narrow.’ So Egypt isn’t just a particular place on a map, but it’s an experience of being stuck in a narrow place, closed off from your surroundings.

It helps to have that word-play in mind when you hear today’s gospel reading where Jesus heals a woman “with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.” This healing would have been a cause for unreserved celebration in most contexts. Except that Jesus did it in a synagogue on the Sabbath. And so it starts an argument. This isn’t totally surprising. Different rabbis had different teachings about how to properly keep the Sabbath. You could intervene someone’s life, but some people said that if it didn’t threaten the life of the woman, then you should just have her wait. Essentially, the arguments are over what constitutes “work” and what doesn’t.

Jesus wades into that debate, but he comes in at an angle. And he says that instead of arguing over what is and isn’t “work,” we need to remember that Sabbath is actually *for*. Not just *How do we do this?* But *Why are we doing this in the first place?*

When the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they labored every day. Life was “hard servitude” and “ruthless tasks” and “taskmasters” who keep a close eye on your every move, lest you step out of line. The world is “closed.” There is no reality aside from the one that pharaoh creates. Hence the play on “narrow.”

When the Israelites are liberated from slavery, brought through the narrow Red Sea and into the expanse of the wilderness, God commands them to keep a Sabbath day. As it’s recorded in Deuteronomy, “Remember that you were a enslaved in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

So why do you keep the sabbath? It’s not just so you have a day of rest. It’s certainly not so you can recharge your batteries and hit the ground running on Monday morning. You keep sabbath to remind you that God brought you out of a narrow place into a place of freedom.

We often think of Sabbath as a kind of negative space—it’s just a day when you *don’t* do something—but that’s not quite right. Sabbath is a practice. It’s something you do to become more aware of God’s action. And it’s for something that’s mentioned three times in today’s reading. It’s *for* freedom. It’s *for* being brought out of the narrow place. It’s *for* being able to love God and love our neighbors.

And in this case, it’s *for* people like this woman. This woman has an obvious physical ailment that would be apparent to anyone. The issue is first and foremost with her back, but this physical condition has a huge existential cost. Her vision is limited. We could even say that her field of vision has been narrowed. That narrow life means she is rarely looked at eye-to-eye. She is someone who is rarely spoken *to*. She is someone who is spoken *about*. Someone who can never really be sure what people are saying about her and the reason for her condition. Sabbath, freedom from the narrow place, is precisely *for* people like her.

When you frame it that way, the healing of this woman isn’t an exception to the rule. It’s not like, *Well... okay... this isn’t normal, but we’ll go along with it for now*. It is actually the whole point. God freed the

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777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481

(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG

Israelites from slavery generations ago just as God frees this woman from what the RSV calls her “spirit of infirmity.” God brings her out of this narrow experience of life.

And other people are brought out of their narrow experience of life, too.

First, the narrowness of the religious leaders in this community. One of the shocking elements of this story isn't the woman's condition, but the length of time she's been living with it. Eighteen years. And judging by the leader of the synagogue, eighteen years and a day would be the same difference.

In Luke's gospel, sin is identified not with people who take their best shot at following Jesus but get it wrong. Not with people who make their reverent best guess and fall short. No, sin is identified primarily with people who cannot be bothered. James Keenan, a Jesuit priest, says that it's a “failure to be bothered to love.” The real barrier to the kingdom of God isn't incompetence or ignorance. It's indifference.

The religious leaders in this story are not particularly hostile to this woman. They're not rude. They're not mean. They're just indifferent. They have a narrow reading of scripture justified by a narrow interpretation of their interests. And for Luke, that's part of what they need to be redeemed from.

Second, the narrowness of this community. One of the ironies of the healing stories in Luke's gospel is that people often stayed in their communities after being healed. It would be easy to imagine this woman following Jesus now, but she doesn't. In one story, Jesus actually tells someone who's been healed that they can't follow him, and they need to stay in their community while Jesus takes off.

Why is that? It could be because Jesus already has enough disciples. It could be because Jesus doesn't like hanging with them. Or it could be something deeper. Because this woman and this community need to figure out how to repair their relationships and their community. This woman was likely shunned, ignored, judged, or patronized, at best. And while this woman might be healed in an instant, this community is going to take some time to get back to repair the breaches. It will mean stepping out of the narrow roles this community has learned how to play and stepping into new relationships, new vocations, and new perspectives, learning to live with this woman who can now see them eye-to-eye.

And third, our own narrowness. You might remember that one of Luther's old images of sin was the person turned in on themselves who reaches deeper into themselves to find wholeness but just winds themselves even tighter.<sup>1</sup> So often, our default response to difficulty is to make our range of concern even narrower, to turn further in on ourselves. We take a narrower vision of our community, our family, our church, our vocations, and creation itself. But it only leaves us isolated and exhausted without any sense of purpose.

Jesus brings us out of the narrow places in our lives, gets us out of just asking *how* things are supposed to be done, and gives us the freedom to see what these gifts are actually *for*. Jesus sets us free from our ailments of anxiety, indifference, and self-preservation that only narrow our vision and brings us into the wide expanse of God's great love for the world.

And so we join our voices with the woman and the crowd of the synagogue and the crowd at the synagogue. What wonderful things God does this day and always.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>1</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 182.