

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Year C  
The Reverend D. S. Mote, PhD  
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL  
August 21, 2022  
Jeremiah 1:4-10  
Psalm 71:1-6  
Hebrews 12:18-29  
Luke 13:10-17

## Unexpected Grace

She went to synagogue on the sabbath. It's what she did, every sabbath, every week. It was her custom. She was faithful and devout.

That day seemed no different. She was a daughter of Abraham and Sarah, and it was the sabbath. So, she went to synagogue. She was faithful and devout. She was also contorted, bent over.

That day was different, though. That day, that sabbath day in her local synagogue a different rabbi was there along with the others she usually encountered.

That rabbi also went to synagogue every sabbath; it was his custom. The rest of the week every week he was out and about mixing it up with folks, but on the sabbath, he, a son of Abraham and Sarah, went to synagogue. He was itinerant, so he didn't always turn up at the same synagogue each week.

That sabbath, Jesus of Nazareth turns up in her synagogue. When she arrives, he is in the middle of teaching. He sees her, sees her bent over nearly double. He stops teaching and calls her over.

He says, "Ma'am, you are set free from your ailment." He lays his hands on her, and immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God.

Right away there's a fuss from the leader of the synagogue. There's a lot of pontificating about whether healings should be done on the sabbath day because even if they are good works, they're still work, and on the sabbath: no work, only rest.

Jesus calls out the synagogue leader and the crowd. Even on the sabbath we tend to the creatures whose care is entrusted to us. By implication, he claims this unnamed daughter of Abraham and Sarah as someone who is his to care for.

The religious authorities are embarrassed by his answer. The crowds, all of them, rejoice at the wonderful things he is doing.

After some weeks of hard sayings and difficult teachings of Jesus in Luke's gospel, today we get a bit of a reprieve in this story of a beautiful healing by Jesus on the sabbath in a synagogue.

Can we imagine ourselves there? Would we have been on the side of the synagogue leader or Jesus? The healing was a disruption in the midst of the usual sabbath services and teaching. We are Episcopalians after all. We like things done decently and in good order.

Would we have been rejoicing because of the wonderful things Jesus was doing like all of those in the crowd? Or would we have been suspicious about this Jesus, this itinerant rabbi, and his ministry and motives? He's not operating in the ways we are used to seeing someone operate.

These are interesting questions to ponder. I wonder though if there are some other questions that seem even more pressing with respect to this story.

Let's go back to the beginning. A woman goes to synagogue on the sabbath. She is contorted, bent over and, as our translation has it, is "quite unable to stand up straight." Why? Did you hear it? Luke says she had "a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years." She had a spirit that had crippled her.

It doesn't say she had scoliosis or osteoporosis or some other physical malady. A spirit crippled her, and her body reflected the state of her spirit. Crippling doubt? Crippling burdens? Crippling obligations? Crippling unrealistic expectations? Crippling depression? Crippling grief? Crippling anxiety? Perhaps some combination of these. A spirit crippled her, kept her bent her over, and hemmed in her life in restricting ways.

Most of us like to hear of these instant healings affected by Jesus. We tend to tell ourselves things don't really happen anymore. What we see is the difference between healing and a cure.

What spirits are there that can cripple us for years, for decades? Depression. Addiction. Anxiety. Grief. Abuse. Yes.

And spirits of inadequacy and insufficiency. The ones that come with voices that say "I'm not enough" and "I'm just \_\_\_\_." These are crippling spirits.

A crippling spirit speaks from the mouth of the future prophet Jeremiah when he responds to God's call with, "I'm just a youth. I'm not old enough, smart enough, wise enough, good enough, educated enough—not enough."

To which God responds, “Don’t say, ‘I’m just a youth; I’m only a boy.’ You are old enough to be sent by me and empowered by me to do all I am calling you to do. I will put my words in your mouth, and you will speak. You are enough to do the work that’s meant for you. You are enough to live the life that’s given to you.”

Crippling spirits keep us from standing up and growing up into the full measure of Christ. Sometimes we become so accustomed to living with them that we don’t even realize how they have bent us over into contorted and contracted versions of the people God has created us to be.

Jesus the Christ came to share our life, to meet us where we are. Just as he saw and took time for this daughter of Abraham and Sarah in today’s gospel story, so he sees and has time for each of us. For each of us as for her, he has an empowering word and a healing touch.

God in Christ speaks the words we need to hear often through others who are placed in our lives. God in Christ heals us, and that healing can take a long time, sometimes much longer than we would like, sometimes much longer than we feel we are able bear. But even if there is not an immediate cure, there is healing, often over long stretches of time, as we live and learn and love in community as Christ’s Body in the world.

When Jesus of Nazareth turns up in that daughter of Abraham and Sarah’s hometown synagogue that day, the short version is, grace has come to town. She doesn’t expect it. She doesn’t ask for it. She doesn’t deserve it. She can’t earn it. She can’t imagine it. But she can receive it. And she does. So can we. So do we. What is that grace exactly?

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Last Monday, August 15, Frederick Buechner died. He was 96. Buechner was a Presbyterian minister and author of some forty books. His honest and grace-filled writing helped me and all my seminary friends make it through seminary. His work has continued to accompany and assist me across the decades. It’s fair to say he has been part of my healing.

If the question is, “What is grace exactly?” here is one of Buechner’s answers (originally published in *Wishful Thinking* and later in *Beyond Words*):

After centuries of handling and mishandling, most religious words have become so shopworn nobody’s much interested anymore. Not so with *grace*, for some reason. Mysteriously, even derivatives like *gracious* and *graceful* still have some of the bloom left.

Grace is something you can never get but can only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever *tried* to love somebody?

A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.

The grace of God means something like: "Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are*, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you."

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it.

Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift too.