

A Change in the Air: Well...Then When?

Luke 13:10-17

Farmville Baptist Church

August 21, 2022

I want to start today by asking you to be in prayer for my son, Jonathan. He's been dealing with nosebleeds for years – not dangerous, mind you, but pretty frequent – and it's time to do something to correct that tendency. Tomorrow morning, he's having a very minor procedure that should help. It's his first time ever having something like this, anesthesia and everything, but he's being pretty brave about it. Don't talk with him about it after the service, please – we don't want to stoke any anxiety – but we would appreciate your prayers.

I was about Jonathan's age the first time I ever had surgery. I was 8, and I woke up one morning with a pain in

my side. I spent part of the day at school, but had to be picked up and taken to the doctor because it was hurting so much. It didn't take the doctor long to determine I was suffering from appendicitis. My parents took me over to Lynchburg to the hospital, where I was prepped for surgery and wheeled back. A few hours later, I woke up, groggy and still hurting, but on the road to recovery.

Unlike Jonathan, my condition had to be addressed right away. An inflamed and infected appendix can lead to some ~~really~~ bad outcomes if it isn't treated, usually with surgery, pretty quickly. It was much more important that day, and in the days after, that I receive the medical care and recovery time that my sickness needed than that I sit in the school classroom. Fortunately, my school took my health seriously; a little work got sent home for me to complete during my convalescence, but there was no complaint or demand that I

be rushed back into the classroom. When someone is suffering, that takes priority over a lot of things. Easing someone's suffering, setting them free from pain and torment, is an undeniably good thing.

But sometimes, people can't see the forest for the trees, ^{including some} ~~many~~ religious people. And we see that on clear display in our passage today.

In our story from Luke's Gospel, Jesus faces a situation where someone is suffering. Her condition does not appear ^{immediately} life-threatening – she's been suffering for 18 years – but the key word there is *suffering*. Carolyn Sharp, professor of Hebrew Scriptures at Yale Divinity School, connects this woman's condition with specific pains and symptoms: her bent spine over such a long period likely brought neck and back pain, fatigue, respiratory challenges, and even potential issues with her cardiovascular system. Add to these physical

limitations the frustration, vulnerability, and isolation such symptoms over many years almost certainly brought, and *suffering* might be too simple a word for what this woman experienced.¹ Jesus himself likens her condition to being bound by Satan, chained or imprisoned within her own body – not a sickness, really, but an enslavement by something that is opposed to God.

So he freed her.

Now, we read that and may have a variety of responses. We may have doubts over how Jesus could provide healing beyond the medical knowledge of his day, or ours for that matter. We could experience jealousy, especially if we have known or even experienced ourselves a long-standing physical limitation that has caused us pain and suffering and social isolation. We could develop a degree of cynicism –

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21-3/commentary-on-luke-1310-17-5>

there were lots of folks suffering in Jesus' day; why didn't he heal all of them, or even wave his hands and do away with every single disease and hurt, forever and always? All of those are questions we may wrestle with, and indeed we need to think through for ourselves what it means that we believe that God heals and that Jesus cares for us in a world where we still hurt, where people we love still suffer.

However, none of that changes that here, in this moment, this woman who had suffered long finally had been healed. None of that changes that, on this holy Sabbath day, at this divinely-blessed encounter, this daughter of Abraham was freed.

And of course, someone looked at Jesus, standing beside this newly-healed woman in the synagogue, and found fault with him. "Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are

six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”² He, along with many other Jewish religious leaders – though not all – held that the Sabbath command of God, to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy,” found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy, was the epitome of human faithfulness.

Solid reasoning, we might say. After all, the command in both places is clear – to honor the Sabbath and make room for rest, not just for ourselves but to create space for others.

Such a command, enshrined in the Ten Commandments,

may well be held up as a high rule, one we don't break just because it is more convenient. *Indeed, sabbath-style rest is vital for human flourishing.* ~~No~~ the religious leader said,

there are six other days to do work – why not wait till then?

Except Jesus essentially says of the synagogue leader's comment, “Hogwash!”

² Luke 13:14

You see, Jesus, especially as we see Jesus in Luke but as we understand him from the other Gospels as well, Jesus is all about salvation in the here and now and not just for eternity. He has come to bring abundant life, *now*. His mission is to seek and to save the lost, to be the great physician to those who need him. And in doing so, there is not a single reason to wait. The fourth command was certainly about the Sabbath – “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy”³ – but it was never meant to keep anyone from doing things that celebrated or, especially, restored life. Even the later part of the commandment, the explanation for it, points to this, at least in Deuteronomy’s version. The Exodus version of the command gives this rationale: God made the world in six days and then rested, and in honor of that you should rest one out of every seven days as well. But

³ Deuteronomy 5:12

in Deuteronomy, the Sabbath is taught as a memorial to God's saving work for his people, explicitly a moment of liberation: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."⁴ The Sabbath was commanded as a part of the worship of God precisely because God is all about freeing people from suffering, pain, and oppression.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise us, then, that Jesus often observed the Sabbath by freeing people from their suffering. Out of about fifteen episodes of healing in Luke's Gospel, five of them take place on the Sabbath.⁵ Jesus chooses to use the Sabbath day to free people from the suffering and oppression of evil spirits, urgent infections, and chronic afflictions. And

⁴ Deuteronomy 5:15

⁵ Luke 4:31-37, Luke 4:38-44, Luke 6:1-10, Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-6

in almost every case, he uses the healing as a chance to affirm the life-giving and freeing power of God's Spirit – something that is incredibly appropriate to do on the Sabbath, the day to honor God's ultimate act in Jewish history for liberation and freedom from oppression.

In this, he was standing against at least some of the prevailing religious opinion of his day. The synagogue leader who became indignant wasn't alone; three of the five Sabbath healings in Luke record Pharisees and experts in the Law – in other words, the most religious people of the day – standing against Jesus' healing acts that saved people from pain and suffering. They echoed the voice of the synagogue leader in today's passage: "Wait."

Wait. Not yet. Not now. These are the words of people who see the world around them, the suffering of people made in the image of God, suffering from illness, injury,

oppression, injustice, and evil, and let those things continue, that pain continue, that oppression and evil continue because addressing it or stopping it or healing it might rock the boat. Healing the woman who has suffered for eighteen years might possibly, though incredibly unlikely, cause people to look for loopholes in the Sabbath command – so she needs to continue suffering for the sake of the status quo.

I hear the synagogue leader's words of waiting and I'm reminded of the response of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to a collection of clergymen in Birmingham, Alabama. As he sat in jail, imprisoned for his work in Birmingham to seek civil rights through nonviolent means, he read an open letter from this group of white clergy. They generally agreed segregation was wrong and the Black community was suffering, but they didn't think the work of King and his supporters as they worked with the local bus boycott and sit-ins and . . .

ongoing struggle in Birmingham was good. They called ^{the} ~~it~~ ^{campaign} “unwise and untimely.” King remarked in his open letter of response, “Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement ~~that~~ ^{that} was ‘well-timed’ according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word ‘Wait!’...This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’”⁶ Much of the rest of his letter elaborates on how it is easy for those who are not suffering to reject calls for addressing harmful, painful, or oppressive situations – but such calls to “wait” only serve to prolong pain, suffering, and injustice.

Jesus, I think, would have agreed with Dr. King. Luke’s Gospel consistently portrays Jesus as offering salvation – but it is never just salvation from the eternal consequences of sin. It certainly includes that, but it also consistently

⁶ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

includes the earthly, physical elements of salvation. So the woman in this story, whose infirmity is held to be the result of an evil spirit but that has long-lasting physical effects, is set free by Jesus – the language of salvation. Is it merely the salvation of her eternal soul? No – it is the salvation of her physical body, long bound by the pain of her condition. It is the salvation of her mental and emotional health, freed from the strain of her limitations and relieved of the pain she suffered. It is the salvation of her social engagement, as she is now released from any restrictions that kept her from friendship and community. This is salvation for her – and if it couldn't be granted to her on the Sabbath, the weekly memorial day of God's salvation acts in history, then when could it be granted?

Down through the ages, the church has sided far too often with the synagogue leader and not with Jesus. We

have boxed people in, excused conditions of suffering, blinded ourselves to the ravages of evil and oppression on the very people Jesus would say were “the least of these” – and all because it didn’t affect us. Sometimes, it was because of our culture, our context, like the white clergymen in Alabama who couldn’t understand why it was worth a bit of discomfort to bring an end to oppressive segregation. Other times, it was because the church truly didn’t understand, like the many churches who supported harsh approaches to alcoholics because they didn’t understand the physical realities of addiction as a disease, or the church leaders who won’t help someone who is poor who can’t seem to help themselves out of it – because the socioeconomic system makes it impossible for a huge swath of people to get out of poverty. We, the church, the religious people, look at the brokenness around us and usually say, “Wait.”

It shouldn't surprise us that the people who are suffering will respond, "Well, then when?" It shouldn't surprise us that those who are hurting, or whose loved ones have suffered long, will see our failure to act, our failure to heal, and walk away from us, from the church. And it shouldn't surprise us, either, that we find Jesus hard at work in ways we cannot understand – because Jesus' response to "Well, then when?" is, "Now." Or, as he says in our passage in response to the irate religious leader, "Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"⁷ He didn't care that his actions that day humiliated the synagogue leader who so misunderstood the way of God. He only cared that this woman, a beloved child, not just of Abraham, but of God, would be saved.

⁷ Luke 13:16

I mentioned last week that I love stories of the sea, and as I was looking at our Gospel reading for this week, a sea story I read in childhood came back to mind. I don't remember the book I read it from, but I did a little digging online and found a bunch of articles about this story; I even found out it had a Virginia connection. On August 26, 1942, the USS *Seadragon*, a submarine in the Pacific Ocean, set out on its fourth war patrol, heading to the South China Sea. While on station in September, a crewman fell ill. Submarines at the time did not carry doctors; instead, each sub had an enlisted crewman, officially a pharmacist's mate, who had training that touched on emergency medicine, basic pharmacology, and a good amount of nursing know-how. But what the *Seadragon's* pharmacist's mate quickly determined was that the sick crewman didn't need an EMT, a

pharmacist, or a nurse. He needed a surgeon, fast – because his appendix was about to burst.

The problem was, the nearest doctor was thousands of miles away.

So Pharmacist Mate First Class William Lipes, of Roanoke, Virginia, went to his captain and told him that he needed to operate on the sick crewman, immediately, or he would probably die.

The captain knew that regulations said what to do: the man should be cared for with rest, medicine, ice packs – essentially comfort care. With good luck, the appendix would hold until they could get back to shore. But this young man was suffering. The medical man on the scene said that the situation was urgent. Considering all the factors, the captain gave Pharmacist's Mate Lipes the go-ahead. In fact, he ordered him to do the surgery. Submerging the boat to a

depth of 120 feet to avoid snooping enemy planes or ships during the delicate procedure, the whole crew got things ready. As a recent article pointed out,

“Everything about the surgery would be jury-rigged. The operating room was the wardroom. Lipes’ medical kit didn’t include all the necessary supplies. The anesthetic mask was an inverted tea strainer covered with gauze. Ether would be slowly dripped onto the gauze. Bent tablespoons served as retractors. Lipes’ scalpel was a scalpel blade taped to a hemostat. The instruments were sterilized in torpedo juice – the pure alcohol drained from torpedo motors. Light was provided by a battle lantern. Five officers would assist Lipes. Their surgical garb was pajamas turned inside out and sterilized in boiling water and alcohol. Lipes’ sterilized rubber gloves were too large for his hands, making him look like Mickey Mouse.”⁸

⁸ <https://www.defensemедianetwork.com/stories/appendectomy-on-a-submarine/>

As I said earlier, I've had an appendectomy. In a hospital. With trained surgeons. That was scary enough. But to have to have your appendix taken out under those wartime conditions, over a hundred feet underwater, on a dining table and with bent spoons dipped in torpedo fuel as surgical instruments – well, let's just say that it doesn't evoke confidence. But there was no time to wait.

The surgery was successful, and the sick man recovered. But when the sub got back to base and submitted its report, Pharmacist's Mate Lipes wasn't honored with a medal. He was almost court-martialed. Why? Because this was well outside the established procedure. Surgeries weren't approved on submarines without doctors, and the upper echelon worried that if any appreciation was expressed, other crews would be emboldened to do similar life-saving surgeries *against regulations.* Lipes was ultimately not punished, but he wasn't

recognized, either, because he saved a life – but he did it in a way and a time that the powers-that-be deemed improper or untimely. Never mind the fact that a life was saved that would otherwise have been lost – some people just couldn't overlook how this young man, and his captain, weren't willing to wait.

For Jesus, waiting is never an option. His answer to the question, “Well...then when?”, is “Right now. Today is the day of healing, of rescue, of freedom. Today is the day of salvation.” This is the way of a God who hears the cry of everyone who is hurting, everyone who suffers, everyone who is damaged or unjustly limited or held down and back by evil...and says, “Be free.” This is a change from the status quo, from the way things have been – but it is the way of God. Will we do our part when those around us are hurting? Will we be agents of God's salvation, not just caring for the

broken and the suffering, but actively working to free them from their bondage and their pain? Will we feel the change that Jesus brought in the air of our lives, of our church, of our world...and will we join him in saying, “Now is the time. Let’s not wait.”