

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:101-17

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Americans take 80 percent of all painkillers taken in the world. We are a nation in search of a way out of pain. Over-the-counter pills are taken in record numbers. Americans buy over 3 billion Tylenol each year. As my wife and I have stock in the company, I guess this is good news for us. But it's also bad news because none of us like to be in pain.

The source of all pain runs the gamut from muscle aches to bone pains, from headaches to arthritis, from broken hearts to crushed spirits. In each situation, people cry out for the pain to stop. For some, pain is alleviated with medication. For others, the pain never ends. Most of us would rather find a miracle cure. In today's Gospel reading, we hear how life is transformed for a hurting woman at the synagogue by the presence of Jesus.

Luke tells us she was "a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight." Eighteen years is a long time. We can safely assume she regularly prayed for healing. Week after week, year after year, she worshiped God in the synagogue in faith and hope without much relief. Jesus referred to her as a "daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound."

Translators of the Bible interpret this malady differently. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says she was "twisted and bent with arthritis." *The English Standard Version* says she had a "disabling spirit." The J.B. Phillips paraphrase says she had been "ill from some psychological cause." *The New English Bible* says she was "possessed by a spirit that had crippled her." Which ever it was, she had lived with this painful handicap for nearly two decades.

Everyone is handicapped at some time in life. Physical ailments, psychological struggles, dark nights of the soul, abuse by others, addictions — whatever cripples a person in preventing the full life God intended. These are the things from which Jesus wants to free us.

So on this particular Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when He saw this woman bent over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And when He laid His hands on her, she immediately stood up straight and began praising God. Everyone else had seen this poor woman shuffle in, but Jesus had a habit of seeing people in a different light. He saw Zacchaeus, hated by all, up a tree, and went to lunch with him, changing his life and status in town. Jesus saw a dozen men from all walks of life and called them to be His disciples. Jesus saw a woman at the well and a woman caught in adultery, and recognized their value as beloved daughters of God.

Now Jesus saw a woman who had been bound for so long, it seemed miraculous how she even made it in coming to church. What if she decided she was just too tired and hurt too much to get out of bed? But she came in faith — and left having been set free and healed! No wonder she immediately began praising God!

At the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus set His agenda as He read from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives ... to let the oppressed go free.” Jesus did exactly this, and the crooked woman was straightened out. Most people were amazed and praised God.

But not everyone was happy. The leader of the synagogue, “indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath,” tried to turn the crowd against Him, saying: “There are six days when work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” It’s unbelievable how anyone would react this way, especially in the church. Unfortunately, some people feel their pain magnified in church settings. One woman claims: “I’ve met more Christians who were arrogant, self-righteous and judgmental than I care to mention. Religion began to make me feel sick. Spouting Bible verses at me made me feel bad about myself and angry. I don’t attend church because it makes me feel sad, guilty and depressed.” Ouch! I’ve talked to people who feel the same way, haven’t you? Misguided people can do a lot of collateral damage. The military call it “friendly fire.”

For the Synagogue leader, he simply ignored the fact how 18 years of suffering and misery were over for this woman. This Jesus had come and disrupted his legalistic routines, so he was determined to find something to criticize. However, Jesus clearly believed “the Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath.” In fact, Jesus healed on the Sabbath seven times.

Imagine what this woman’s life was like after Jesus set her free. I suspect the first night she stayed up as long as she possibly could, because the freedom of movement and spirit was exhilarating. Possibly, she feared going to bed. What if she woke up the next morning to find it was all a dream? Yet, the next morning she was still healed. “Thank you, Lord!” Hopefully she would look beyond herself to see ways she could help others.

We know the best way to live is ... gratefully. Do you and I focus on the positive? Or are we distracted by pain, frustration and inconvenience? Are we tempted to give up, stuck in a rut too long, feeling like there are no reasons for hope? Might we avoid relationships with hurting people, because we feel ineffectual to fix their problems? I believe friends are those people who double our joys and cut our sorrows in half. With God’s help, they help straighten us

out and to again stand tall. Medication, healthcare providers, counselors and teachers all have their place in bringing healing to this wounded world. They might even help us learn to embrace the pain and journey through it ... as a means of therapy to regain our strength. Jesus is our greatest friend. Don't be afraid to share Him and your friendship with others ... in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.