

**From the Pulpit of
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, SARASOTA FL**

Eighteen Years

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Luke 13:10-17
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Eighteen years ago, Jeb Bush was the governor of Florida. Bob Graham and Bill Nelson were the two Senators from Florida. George W. Bush was running for a second term as President of the United States, and John Kerry was the other major candidate. Eighteen years ago the Boston Red Sox won their first World Series since 1918. I'm not really a fan of the Red Sox, but they did win the World Series that year. Eighteen years and one week ago, Hurricane Charley hit Punta Gorda and Port Charlotte, and was so very close to hitting Sarasota and Tampa, where we were living at the time. Where were you eighteen years ago? Some of you were living where you live now. I would imagine some of you – perhaps many of you – were living elsewhere eighteen years ago. Were you still working then? There were probably family members with you then that are not with you now. Think of all the changes that have taken place in your life in the last eighteen years. Eighteen years can be a long time.

It was eighteen years that this woman about whom Luke tells us had been bent over and unable to stand up straight. Can you imagine eighteen years where usually what you could see was the top of your feet, without the ability to straighten up and look someone in the eye? Chances are that she had gone to different physicians to get help, but she got no help. For whatever reason, she was that day where Jesus was, but apparently she did not approach Jesus and say that she had heard he had a reputation of healing people, and could he heal her? She did not speak to Jesus. Maybe she just went to the synagogue that day to listen to him speak and teach, for she had also heard he was such a wonderful teacher. Then Jesus called to her, asked her to come towards him, and he “set her free from her ailment.” She was able to stand up. Eighteen years of being bent over, but Jesus said the word, and she could stand straight. What would you think if you were there that day? Would you join her in shouting out “Praise God”? Would you be clapping and maybe crying at the same time? Would you just be saying, over and over again, “Wow”? Would you want to go to the woman and give her a hug? I think most of us would do something like that.

How many of you would say, “Look, lady, I know you have had this ailment for eighteen years, so what’s one more day? You should stay bent over until tomorrow, because today is the Sabbath”? Doesn’t that sound pretty heartless? It does to me. Yet that is what the leader of the synagogue after Jesus healed the woman.

Think of some of the other events that took place in Jesus’ ministry. There was a time when Jesus and his disciples were walking through a wheat field, and they were hungry. So they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. The religious leaders complained to Jesus “This is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” In other words, “Sorry, boys, but you have to go hungry until tomorrow.”¹ Or the time Jesus healed a man with a withered hand. Again, he did this on the Sabbath. The religious leaders didn’t like that, and Jesus knew that they didn’t like it. It isn’t right to cure a man on the Sabbath, they said. Yet after Jesus healed the man, the religious authorities went out and “immediately conspired with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him.” It isn’t ok for you to heal the man on the Sabbath, Jesus, but it is ok for us to start

working together with those we usually consider to be our enemies on how to develop a plan to kill you.ⁱⁱ

So here is the question: when did the rules become more important than the people? When did following certain rules and regulations become more important than having compassion for people? I'm not putting this in some large, geopolitical sense, or dealing with the legal system. I'm just wondering just how it is that someone can look at a woman who was bent over for eighteen years and thought that the rule was more important than a woman who could be set free from eighteen years of distress and pain.

Yet it seems to me that so many times we in the church seem to focus a lot of attention on rules. No, I don't think anyone would ever say that the woman should wait one more day to be healed. But those rules and laws and regulations sure seem to be uppermost in many people's minds. "I hope I have been good enough to get to heaven," as I said not too long ago, is something I have heard so very often in my ministry. To me, that statement means, "I hope I have followed enough of the rules and regulations that I will get a good grade when it is my turn to take the test."

In a previous church I served, before singing some songs, the person leading those songs sometimes made a statement that one day we are going to have to give an account of ourselves before God. You've heard that kind of talk before. We have to total up on our scorecard how many rules and laws and regulations we have followed in our lives, or perhaps get out our moral merit badges in order to show that we passed rather than failed the all-important exam. And if that is what we think, then we just might decide to focus more on the rules than on the people, because we would think that it is our following the rules that wins us points. And there isn't much grace in that kind of thinking.

Let's take a look at the woman with the eighteen-year disability. She was in the synagogue that day when Jesus was there. Again, we don't know if she went there because she knew Jesus was there, or if she went there because it was her custom to go there. But she was in attendance that day. We don't read anything that says she tried to get Jesus' attention. We don't read anything that says she was there to be healed, though it is possible, given Jesus' reputation for healing, she thought that might happen for her. The leader of the synagogue seemed to think that might be a possibility, scolding all the people there that there are six days in the week when you can get healed, but not on the Sabbath. Of course, who knew if Jesus was going to be in town tomorrow, but I don't think the leader of the synagogue was thinking that way. What we read, though, is the woman happened to be there, and Jesus saw her and called her to him. She did nothing other than what Jesus said, which was to go to him. And not only was she healed of her affliction, but Jesus also called her a daughter of Abraham. He didn't see the people he healed as lepers or withered hands or bad backs. He saw them as people – beloved children of God – who had particular needs, and even if some of them didn't ask to be healed, he healed them. Why is that an issue for the religious authorities?

Well, if they were focused on rules and regulations and Sabbath laws rather than people, they would be upset. If they were focused on religious laws rather than compassion for people, they would not like what Jesus did. And this is not something that is relegated to the long-ago past. There are some things in our recent history that show that sometimes people are more focused on laws or regulations or traditions than on people. At the end of March, Donna and I were on a week-long trip in Georgia and Alabama, learning about the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's. There were some rules in the country, and some rules in those states, that were far more focused on rules and traditions rather than on people. The people who protested those laws, or who even

stepped across a particular line – say, on the Edmund Pettus Bridge – were beaten and sometimes killed. For many, there was no thought that the protesters were people. Or think about how we label some people, in order to dehumanize them. A refugee becomes an “illegal alien.” A patient in the hospital becomes “Room 217.” A person on the other side of your political affiliation becomes an enemy, a fascist or a socialist. Bob Dylan asked in his iconic song “Blowing in the Wind,” “how many years can some *people* exist before they're allowed to be free?” And he asked again, “how many ears must one man have before he can hear *people* cry?”ⁱⁱⁱ

But Jesus calls the woman to him and heals her, calling her a daughter of Abraham. Jesus welcomed the stranger, fed the hungry, and healed the sick, even on the Sabbath. That sent the leaders into a tizzy. There were rules to follow, Jesus. And healing on the Sabbath, they would say, violated the fourth Commandment about honoring the Sabbath, and no work being done on the Sabbath.

Do you remember the way Jesus answered the question about which commandment was the greatest? The thought was that all commandments were equally weighted, so breaking one was breaking them all. Which is the greatest commandment, Jesus? How are you going to get out of this trap? And Jesus replied by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”^{iv} Jesus’ answer transcended all the rules and regulations and laws. He didn’t do away with the rules and laws. He said that if one is a person of love, then all those things in the law would fall under the “rule” of love.

Jesus responded in love to the woman in need. Eighteen years she had been suffering, and Jesus thought that one more day was one day too long. The religious leader responded by emphasizing the laws – many of which were human-made interpretations of the Scriptural commandments – but not seeming to care about the woman’s need.

So it comes down to people or rules. It comes down to love or religious law as the first priority. It comes down to seeing people as a daughter or son of Abraham, or as a regulation-breaker. It comes down to seeing people as a child of God, or someone less than a child of God.

Too often the larger church is seen by outsiders as compassion-less people focused more on law than grace. May we live the truth that love and grace and compassion are always – always – first.

ⁱ Matthew 12:1-8

ⁱⁱ Mark 3:1-6

ⁱⁱⁱ Blowing in the Wind, Bob Dylan, 1963 (Italics mine)

^{iv} Matthew 22:34-40