

Having our priorities right: people first

Luke 13. 10-17

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Last November I decided to move to using a new internet provider. I received kind and welcoming emails, but on the day when the new service was supposed to start, I was still waiting for the decoder that was needed. So I called, and called, and the decoder did not come.

‘Yes sir, but our system says that we have mailed it to you.’

‘Sorry, I never received it. So please mail it again.’

After many weeks of waiting, and asking them kindly where the decoder was, I was so fed up! I decided to contract another provider.

But the first one wanted to see money. ‘You have a contract so you must pay...’ I told them, ‘you broke the contract, you never delivered to me the decoder, so why should I pay!’



After many more phone calls and emails and customer service talk, finally some kind person promised to stop this whole nonsense, and yes, I then received an email that they were prepared to cancel my contract without any costs. ‘But please, send us back our decoder.’ Ahhh!

Again I called, and told them: ‘I never received it, that is why you are now prepared to cancel my contract’. A friendly person again, and finally, it was done.

Then about two months ago, I received a letter that I had to pay a fine - because I had never send them their decoder back... Again a phone call to explain. ‘Sorry sir, it was the system.’

Do you not sometimes feel victim of ‘the system’? Where is the human mind, the human heart.

The story we read in the Gospel was in a way about this issue. The tension that can exist between the system, the law, how things must be done..... and the human individual.

1. The crippled woman

The human individual in our story is the woman. A woman “with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.”

This is how Luke, a medical doctor, reports about her problem.

Luke speaks of a spirit that had crippled her. I do not want to now go into the issue of how the spiritual world and the physical world are intertwined, but for sure they are.

The physical problem of the woman had impact of course on her spiritual or mental state. What happens to your sense of value if some deep problem cripples you for so long?

Maybe the woman had a herniated disk; if you ever had something like that you know how that cripples your whole life.

A problem of this magnitude - to walk bend over for 18 years - interferes with your everyday tasks and with your social relationships. It also puts a strain on organs in your body, so it impacts badly on your health in general.

The woman could hardly move around. She only looked at the dust on the road, the carpet on the floor. She saw the slippers of other people. She could not look up at the sky and she could not look people in the eye.

18 Years of such misery, that is a long time. She must have felt like a bird on a wire. There was no escape from being different and from suffering, and from feeling low. She was tied to her problem. Her problem defined now who she was. She was crippled.

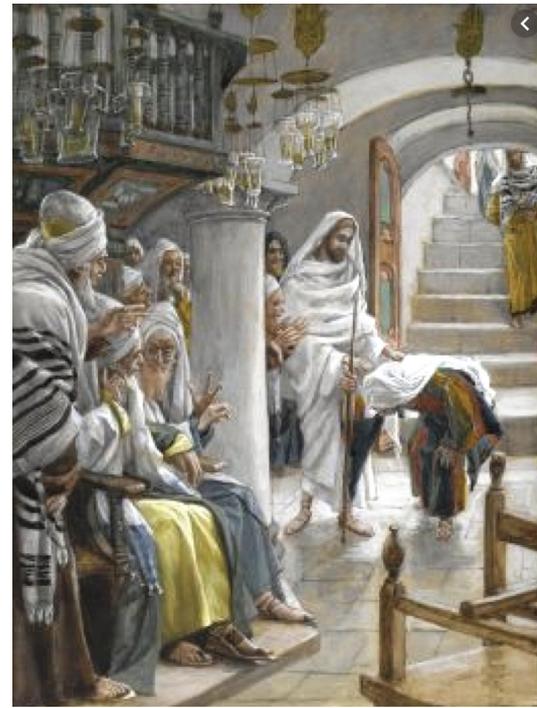
It is interesting that the woman was in the synagogue. I think it is fair to assume that she woman was being cared for by her Jewish community of faith, the synagogue of which she was a part.

But even to be taken care of for 18 years, is not good for your self image. No one wants to be on the receiving end of charity for such a long time. It shrinks the soul.

2. The leader of the synagogue

But at least she was part of that synagogue community, and let us praise the leader of the synagogue - another character in our story - for welcoming the woman.

But he did not appreciate at all that Jesus healed her on the sabbath. Every Jew knew his laws - a doctor is not supposed to heal a person on the sabbath. The Jewish laws aimed to honour God by keeping the sabbath holy, without work.



The leader of the synagogue had a responsible position, and he was trying to uphold what he understood to be God's will. 'We have our laws, our systems', he argued, 'and let us uphold those systems.'

This leader of the synagogue was, naturally, a man of the law. So how bad that in his synagogue, those laws are broken. God would be upset.

Maybe he was also worried about his own image as leader, because according to Luke "he kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.'"

"There are six days in which men ought to work." Ought. He kept saying it. This is the divine imperative. 'We are commanded to work six days. Therefore come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath!'

Everyone of us sometimes struggles with such issues. On the one hand, we have our rules to uphold, our standards, and if we let go of those for the sake of accommodating certain people, where do you draw the line? What exceptions do you allow?

How will other people see you? As a weak person, because for the sake of one person, you bend the rules? Every teacher knows that if you allow one child some special grace, tomorrow every student will demand that you bend the rules for his or her sake!

Parents, employers, supervisors, police, religious leaders, they struggle with such issues.

And think of this. In the case of our story, Jesus could have easily compromised to make everyone happy. If he had just waited till sundown, and then healed the woman, nothing would have been wrong. Just a few hours! For a woman who had been ill for 18 years, what is a few hours extra!

Just wait a few hours and the sabbath is honoured and the woman is healed.

Jesus could have avoided this confrontation. And it is precisely because he could have avoided it by waiting a few hours, that I think he purposely sought this confrontation.

Why?

I think he wanted to show the Jews of his days another way of looking at the laws of God, and he wanted to show them that they had their priorities wrong.

3. The Lord

So let us listen to the main character in our story, to our Lord Jesus Christ. If we would sit with our brothers and sisters in that synagogue what would we learn and go home with?

First, it is important to see that Jesus' response is not a rejection of the Jewish rulings about the sabbath. Instead, he argues on the basis of legitimate allowances of restricted kinds of 'work' on the sabbath. It is allowed to untie animals.

And he then argues that if animals can be freed on the sabbath, certainly 'this daughter of Abraham' can be freed on the sabbath.

She is a daughter of Abraham. She partakes in God's covenant. She is one of God's beloved people. To free a person from disease, from the bonds of satan, on the sabbath, is a holy task that should be undertaken exactly on that holy day.



Jesus does not suggest that the sabbath should be set aside; he argues that it is fully in line with the will of God to do good on the sabbath. Was the sabbath not intended for people to be set free of the burden of work?

This woman who felt like a bird on a wire, she was burdened by her disease, and now she was set free. This was not a transgression of God's intention with the sabbath; it was in line with God's holy purpose for all of us, that we are freed from our burdens. That we are set free.

If you feel burdened, tied to a problem, Jesus wants to set you free. That is why we pray with confidence for each other. That is why after Holy Eucharist we offer time for intercession for you personally. Jesus is here and he wants to set us free.

Jesus was not kind at all to the leader of the synagogue and to the people who shared his opinions. Not at all. He called them hypocrites.

He called them hypocrites because they were kinder to their animals than to this woman who needed healing, and they used the laws of Israel as an excuse.

The leader believed that it was acceptable on the sabbath to free an animal that has been bound for a few hours but that it was unacceptable to free a woman who had been bound for 18 years.

Untie an animal, okay, but not a human being.

This week I saw an article in Algemeen Dagblad - a long article - about someone who had set a rabbit on fire. Yes that is awful. Shameful.

But are we not hypocritical that in our present society, it seems that we are often more worried about animals than about other humans? It is illegal to tie a dog to a tree, but abortion is legal.



Is it not hypocritical when we cry over whales that are hunted or poor little baby seals that are clubbed to death, but we keep people outside our borders because they are not like us?

Is it not hypocritical that we accept it that mentally disturbed people spend the nights outside in the streets, but when we see a stray dog we have phone numbers to call and the dog is picked up and put in an animal shelter?

So what can we take home from this confrontation of Jesus with the leader of the synagogue?

Conclusion

Jesus entered into this confrontation with the Jewish legal leaders to underline that we should be most concerned with other people, more than with anything else.

We should never let our rules, our principles, come in the way of being a blessing for other people. What walls have you constructed to keep people away from you? And what great rules or habits do you have that keep you from being a blessing for another child of God?

Humans are the summit of God's creation, and all human life is valuable. Your life, my life, that of unborn children, of refugees, of beggars, of the homeless. The life of those you like, and of those you do not like.

What will you do to be a blessing for someone who is tied, burdened, struggling with his life? Do something concrete and tangible this week for someone.

When you are at home, after church, why not make a little list of people whom you know have burdens, and a life that is miserable? And then do something for them. Pray for them, and do something that expresses love.

And if you are that person, a bird on a wire, do not hesitate to ask God for cutting that wire. Sometimes God truly changes our life by taking away our problem. And sometimes he truly changes our life by helping us to no longer see ourselves only in the light of that big problem.

You are a child of God. Whatever happens to you. You are his child. A bird set free. So do not allow circumstances to pull you down.

No wonder the crowd in the synagogue, when they heard the words of Jesus and saw all the wonderful things that he was doing. rejoiced.

+ Amen