

# SERMONS FROM ST. FRANCIS

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 22, 2004

Texts: Isaiah 58:9b-14 and Luke 13:10-17

The Reverend Phyllis Zillhart, Associate Pastor

## REVOLUTIONARY HEALING

Picture that day in the synagogue in ancient Palestine. It was the sabbath, the holy day of worship and rest. Jesus was teaching. I imagine Jesus as the kind of teacher that draws you in, engaging your mind and your will. You almost try not to look at him because he keeps asking you to go deeper in your understanding and your commitment. Yet, you can't help but look into his passionate and compassionate eyes. What was he teaching that day? The material before our Gospel reading from St. Luke is a parable of a barren fig tree that gets one more chance to grow and become the productive fruit tree it was created to be.

St. Luke writes, *"Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to straighten herself."* It wasn't lack of calcium or a dislocated disc or a genetic condition. The gospel-writer is clear. Some kind of spirit has been messing with this woman's body for eighteen long years. J. B. Phillips translates it this way, *"In the congregation was a woman who for eighteen years had been ill for some psychological cause."* What was it? Was it the somatic residue of physical or emotional trauma? Was her bent-over form the embodiment of a broken spirit? Was her disfigurement fear-induced or stress-related? What were the complex links between her mind, her inner spirit, the larger metaphysical world, her personal history and community dysfunction that led to this protracted suffering in her body? We don't know.

What we do know is that Jesus sees her. In the midst of many people and his own teaching vocation, Jesus notices her. He also recognizes her spiritual and physical bondage. He perceives the connections of her inner bondage and her bodily suffering. If we allow ourselves, we see lots of suffering around us. We may even acknowledge our own suffering. We recognize links between physical ailments and poverty, addiction, mental illness, overwork, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. We see many of the spiritual and physical intersections of suffering. We know that dis-ease can bring disease.

Jesus sees even more. Jesus envisions this woman's release! Jesus does not see an endless cycle of poverty, addiction and suffering. Jesus does not rationalize the predictability of intergenerational violence and suffering. Jesus envisions release! He sees a way out. He believes in her liberation.

Jesus invites this bent-over woman to participate in her own transformation. In front of everybody, he called to her. She didn't run and hide. She didn't tell him to mind his own business. She is open to what he will say and do because he has said the most remarkable thing, *"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."* She goes over to him and allows him to touch her. In that embrace of acceptance and liberation, she is freed from her inner bondage

and freely stands upright. The burden of her subservience to this life-stealing power is lifted. She is able to look her sisters and brothers in the eyes, a fully restored member of the community and an empowered witness to God's reign on earth. Her grateful heart overflows with praise to God.

This would seem like a happy ending to nearly twenty years of suffering. Why does the synagogue leader get so bent out of shape, proclaiming that there are six other days of the week better suited to the work of healing? We can understand a code of respect for the sabbath that asks people and animals to refrain from working. But to choose deliberately not to heal on the sabbath seems a bit far fetched. Why would a respected religious authority choose this woman's continued illness and oppression over her spiritual and physical liberation?

The answer is the Achilles' heel of any code of moral improvement. "Good order" sounds desirable. But we are always tempted to invest in the "order" part of the equation even when we have lived past the "good" of our intentions. We cannot control "good" behavior. We can cultivate it, encourage it and reward it. We can hinder hurtful and destructive behavior. But the deeper irony is that our truly "good" behavior is not motivated by seeking approval or avoiding consequences but generates out of the joy of giving freely and connecting deeply. Yet it is also true that we humans need some kind of encouragement to live beyond self-indulgence and the rule of greedy opportunism. But the moral squint of control and the fearful grip of tyranny will not succeed in forming our ethical character. Only God's grace can simultaneously find us where we are and move us to where we need to be. Here the authority of God's kingdom (justice and right-relations) overlap with the welcome of God's kin-dom (our heavenly ties of belonging here on earth).

For Jesus, this is a no-brainer. You'd release an animal on the sabbath to lead it to water. Why wouldn't you free a child of Abraham and Sarah from bonds of oppression on the sabbath? Jesus doesn't condemn the sabbath laws but looks at the motivation of these regulations. What's the larger vision that supports the sabbath code of conduct?

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah gets to the point. The exiles are back from their many years of captivity in Babylon. But they want quick solutions to deeper issues. They want to gain God's favor through proper rituals without enacting justice. The prophet tells them that when you trample the sabbath with lots of ritual but offer no righteousness in your lives, it displeases God. When you oppress your workers and don't share your food, that's no way to plan worship. When you speak evil of others and pursue your own self-interest, God isn't keen on listening to your prayers. The promises are vast if the people turn around and make sincere, meaningful changes: dawning light, guidance, sustenance in difficult times, restoration of broken dreams, a future with hope and delight in Gods' presence.

These enlivening words must be echoing in Jesus' heart and mind as he addresses the narrow-minded religious leaders of his day. The sabbath is made for better things than keeping a woman bent over in shame and pain. The sabbath is made for us to praise God through humble service and sincere worship. What better way than through the liberation of healing?

These texts and their guiding truths come at an opportune moment as we consider our vision for St. Francis. In a few days members of this congregation will receive a revised draft of our Visioning Team's report. Another meeting with the congregation and the Visioning Team is scheduled for next Sunday after Coffee Hour. I hope you can all attend. (Pr. Frost and I will be in Hawaii, enjoying a family vacation planned months ago with our daughter and her two fathers. We will be with you in thought and prayer.) At this meeting you will listen for God's call to you. You will respond thoughtfully, honestly and constructively.

In that meeting, remember that Jesus calls you to recognize the spiritual captivity of a bent-over woman and believe in her liberation. No less than the burst of joy that is released in her healing becomes the spark of inspiration and vision that propels this congregation into our promised future. Can you see her need? Can you feel her joy at being released from fear and alienation? It is your need and mine. It is the longing of our members and neighbors and the wider church and society for more than another change but transformation.

We are tired of more war, increased fear and ever-heightened security. We are not satisfied with buying one more possession to complete the ensemble or the patio or our hungry egos. We have not found the perfect relationship, the body beautiful or the high that lasts forever. It is time to believe and invest in the power of freedom – freedom from conformity, freedom from fear, freedom from whatever pushes our backs over so we can't claim our full connection with our sisters and brothers in this wide world.

The gospel-writer warns us that spiritual freedom and physical healing always involve some measure of resistance to the existing backdrop of oppression. This freed, healed woman will always be seen as uppity. She embodies resistance to the status quo. When people are on auto-pilot we go along with pecking orders of power and status. Claiming our wholeness is not a passive past-time. Wholeness invokes the work of making justice a greater reality among us. We make waves. We incur consequences. We are often misunderstood and even rejected. No matter. We are still called to be faithful, to trust God's call, to believe in freedom from the power of sin and alienation and fear.

I am excited about St. Francis' vision. My thanks goes to Fr. Belcher and the Visioning Team for their hard work and prayerful discernment. Their report lifts up three key theological points that can ground and inspire our ministry for years to come. First is the old-fashioned concept of discipleship. We are asked to follow God's leading in our daily lives. We are challenged to commit ourselves to live out the gospel in all we say and do and to share Christ's presence with all we encounter. You are dedicated to radical discipleship. The second is similar in its hand-on commitment. It is the enactment of the priesthood of all believers. St. Francis needs strong pastoral leadership but you also want to anoint and nurture the many leaders and ministries among us. You are committed to strong lay ministry. Third, you cherish the ties of a warm, strong spiritual family but you want to resist the tendency to become ingrown. St. Francis wants to share its healing communal embrace as widely as possible by expanding pastoral ministry opportunities within a teaching parish model. You want your healing joy to serve as a resource of hope and inspiration for others.

In these emphases of sharing our gifts and our selves with others, we know that we are wounded healers, teachers who are ever learning. We know that we can only share the grace and mercy we ourselves receive. So be it. We are called to reflect Christ's light, not generate it. We are called to be faithful, to trust God and to believe in the power of freedom.

For my part, I'm in a growth spurt. My pastoral call to St. Francis, first issued in 1990 and renewed in 1994, is undergoing changes. The circumstances of that call have been changing, particularly in the past five years of transition at St. Francis. The intense pastoral care needed at the height of the AIDS crisis has eased in our midst, thank God. The blending of gifts within a talented multiple staff has shifted. My current pastoral call among you has come to a natural end. Now you and I must discern whether it is time to move on together into a different role and a renewed way of partnering in ministry as pastor and parishioners or whether it is time for new pastoral leadership among you and for me to be called to new ventures of faith somewhere else. In any case, change is upon us. We cannot avoid the losses that come with change nor should we miss the opportunities. It is an end-beginning among us.

In my own growth spurt, I identify with the images of two animals. One image is the growth of a snake that is feeling the pressure of an ill-fit on the eve of shedding its old layer of skin in order to mature into a fuller embodiment of its authentic self. The other image is growth that also leads to an awkward fit in present circumstances. But now the image is that of a bird in the nest that needs to spread its wings and take flight. It looks like going away but really it is moving beyond. Truth be told, I don't know if I'm the snake or the bird. But God knows. So, at this stage, my intention is to remain in the visioning and call process with St. Francis and pursue the lead pastor role when that option is squarely before us. Then, it will be a time of joyous discernment for me, my family, the Call Committee and the people of St. Francis. I say joyous because I trust all of you to make good choices for the sake of St. Francis' overall mission and ministry. I say joyous because I trust God, who has many plans for us all - plans for justice, wholeness and liberation. I say joyous because nothing takes away the love that we share and which marks us forever.

So let us hear it again and claim it forever - "You are set free from your ailment!" You are free to stand up, to look people in the eyes after years of glancing downward - and, at last and with joy, free to dance. † Amen.

**Sermons from St. Francis are published weekly**  
**St. Francis Lutheran Church, 152 Church St., San Francisco, CA 94114-1111**  
**(415)621-2635; FAX: (415)621-8819; E-mail: St.FrancisSF@sbcglobal.net**  
**[www.st-francis-lutheran.org](http://www.st-francis-lutheran.org)**