11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 24, 2025 Pastor Chris Repp
Luke 13:10-17 Grace Lutheran Church, Champaign, Illinois

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

This story of Jesus healing the bent-over woman on the Sabbath may not be on your top ten list of Bible stories. It is not as memorable as stories like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, both also found only in Luke. But it can be, I think, just as useful and just as challenging as those more famous stories for our life of faith if we dig a little. And like those other stories, what it says to us depends upon who we identify with in the story. I think there are three options that make sense and no right answers. In fact, I think that all of them are right answers. Let's see where this goes.

The first and perhaps most natural option is for us to identify with the assembly of folks in the synagogue who witnessed these events take place. It's natural because as readers or hearers of this story we are already filling that role across time and space. And Luke helps us to play that role by how he tells the story. Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath, and "just then there appeared a woman…" I'll stop there for now because I want you to think about what is happening right at this early point in the story. Just then she appears. What do you think; was she late for synagogue that morning and had just arrived? Maybe she was pushing her way through the crowd to get down front, because she was bent over and couldn't see from the back. You might get that impression from our translation. One minute she wasn't there, and then suddenly she was. If it was Star Trek, she might have materialized in a transporter beam. But for the sake of rendering this in colloquial English, our translation might be giving us the wrong impression. I get why they did it, but in this particular instance I think it's obscuring a dynamic that is an important part of this story and its meaning for us. The Greek text that Luke wrote doesn't say she suddenly appeared. It says "And look, a woman…" Luke is actually drawing our attention to someone who was already there in the room and giving us her backstory so that we will understand what happens next. Her backstory is that she has been bent over by a debilitating spirit and had been this way for eighteen years! Now, we couldn't notice this woman if Luke hadn't pointed her out. Of course. That's how stories work. But I'm going to suggest that the assembly didn't notice her either, or at least didn't take particular notice, because she was well known to them. She was a part of their community, always around, part of the furniture, so to speak. And we can guess what they might have thought of her. Because we know from other writings from this period and this culture, that illness or disability was often equated with moral failure, the idea that she "must have done something" to deserve her condition. And maybe *she* thought so too. It seems to be a universal human instinct. And I think it's alive and well today in attitudes and policies that are all over the news at the moment. At any rate, this woman is there, unnoticed by the assembly – as she was unnoticed by us – until she is noticed by Jesus. And when Jesus sees her, he calls he over, declares her freed from her ailment, lays his hands on her, and she stands up straight. And then, "Halleluiah!" is her cry. Praise God!

But this doesn't sit well with the synagogue leader. And he is our second option to identify with in this story. He objects to this unseemly interruption. I get it. I don't like to be interrupted in the middle of a service either, and neither do you. And we don't like to be interrupted at other times, when we are minding our own business, going about our daily tasks, or trying to rest up for what's coming next. But then, get this. The synagogue leader doesn't go after Jesus for healing on the Sabbath – as the Pharisees do so often in the stories of the Gospels. Yes, he is indignant that Jesus had healed this woman, but he doesn't confront Jesus. Instead he

whips up the crowd, and directs their indignation toward her. “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” It’s an oblique attack on Jesus, to be sure, but a direct one on *her*. And she didn’t even do anything wrong! She didn’t come expecting or even asking to be healed. But she is the one to be attacked as a lawbreaker, an “illegal” to use our modern lingo. Now why does that sound familiar? Can you think of any ways that sort of demagoguery is happening in our time and place? You are clever folks. I’ll let you make the connections yourself.

Jesus responds by calling the synagogue leader, and those who have been moved to indignation with him, hypocrites. Here they are, faithfully observing the Sabbath, gathering to remember God’s liberation of their ancestors from captivity in Egypt just like they’re supposed to do. But when one of their own people, a “daughter of Abraham” Jesus calls her, is liberated from her own personal captivity, they cry foul. And yet all of them are happy to use the exception to the no-work rule to untie their own animals and take them to be watered. They are selectively merciful towards their own animals because it serves their interests to keep them alive and healthy. And I want to suggest that we too, individually and collectively as a society, are likewise selectively merciful towards some, and not towards others, and in ways that serve our own interests. And again, I’m going to let you make your own connections, because I’m running out of time.

Our third option is to identify with the woman herself. Now some of us, like her, are indeed afflicted with serious and debilitating illnesses. Some of you are at home right now for that very reason and watching online. Some of our illnesses are physical and more obvious. Some are not, and they often remain hidden and unshared. But all of us are a plagued with a spiritual condition that bends us over and curves us in on ourselves. That is how Martin Luther talked about sin. The irony of this Gospel reading today is that there are a whole bunch of bent over people curved in on themselves who are not healed from their affliction, all in need of mercy themselves. And there is one woman who receives mercy gratefully and goes away with her life changed. It is a foretaste of what is coming, because Jesus is still on his way to the cross in this reading today, on his way to crucifixion and resurrection that are the means of mercy and grace meant to unbend and uncurl all people, and to heal and restore the whole creation.

I said at the beginning of my sermon that there are three people we could identify with in this story, and I have now covered all of them. But I think that there is actually a fourth option, and that is Jesus himself. Jesus confronts the first two with their hypocrisy and heals the last from her infirmity. All of them are us, all of them in need of mercy. And if the woman having received mercy is also us, if we are, like her, unbent and uncurled from our captivity to sin from which are unable to free ourselves, spontaneously praising God with her for liberation from sin, death, and evil, then I want to think about what comes next. I want to think about the possibility that this woman walked out of that synagogue and became one of those who followed Jesus to his cross and beyond, living in the company of the disciples and then as a witness of the resurrection and the new life it brings. That would make her a member of the body of Christ, the hands and feet, and the eyes and ears of Jesus, noticing the unnoticed, seeing others bent over and curved in on themselves, hearing the cries of the marginalized and oppressed, and even noticing in those afflicted by indignation and cruelty a desperate need of liberation and of good news. And then offering that good news in word and in deed, in the name of Jesus, to all who need it. May that be our story too. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and our minds and our daily lives in Christ Jesus our merciful liberator. Amen