

# ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

**Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost • August 25, 2019**

**Isaiah 58:9b-14 • Psalm 103:1-8 • Hebrews 12:18-29 • Luke 13:10-17**

There's a certain pattern in Luke's gospel and its sequel, the book of Acts, that repeats itself over and over again. First, God acts. Second, people respond. God promises Mary that she will have a child. Mary responds by running to tell Elizabeth. Jesus appears on the road to Emmaus. The disciples respond by telling the disciples back in Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit is poured out at Pentecost. The church responds by speaking God's promises in new languages. Over and over again, God acts and people respond. So what Luke is trying to show us in his gospel is not just what God does. He's also trying to show us what people do.

And so it is with today's gospel reading. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when a woman shows up "with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years." Luke says that she was "bent over and unable to stand up straight." Notice that we are given no information about this woman other than her condition. We don't know her name. We don't know about her family. We don't know how old she is. We don't know anything about her life other than her condition.

Sometimes when people read this story, they'll complain that Luke describes her this way. But what Luke is trying to do is show us how her neighbors saw her. She has been reduced down, essentialized, to her condition. Who is she? She's The Bent Over Woman. What else do you need to know? That is her defining characteristic. As far as her neighbors are concerned, that is her essence as a person. There's a gap between the language the community uses to describe her and the way she understands herself.

Luke wants us to see how the language we use to describe people shapes how we see them as people. Language isn't just descriptive, it actually changes the way we engage with others. Think for a minute about something like homelessness.<sup>1</sup> When we use language like "the homeless" or "homeless people," we speak as if this one descriptor is exhaustive of this person's life. As if it is integral to who they are as a person. As a result, we assume that it is just normal for this person to be homeless. But if we change our language a little bit, if we say, "person experiencing homelessness" or "person who is unhoused," now the way we understand them changes in some way. Because now I see the problem as a situation this person is in. And I understand that even though someone doesn't have a house, they still have a home.

It's easy to deride this kind of thing as a bunch of politically correct language policing. But even the way that phrase is deployed reveals the power that language has. When we define our identities and how we are addressed, we say it's a matter of respect. But when people who we think are not like us do it, we complain that it's just political correctness run amok.

We might roll our eyes at being asked to say "persons who are unhoused" instead of "the homeless," but think about it in terms of today's story. If you were introduced to someone living with MS, and the person who introduced you called them "crippled," you would be justifiably upset. And you wouldn't say that this person needs to be more politically correct. You'd say they need to see other people as, well, people. That's what Luke is getting at. What Luke wants us to see is that

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Hearlson has a good discussion of this in *The Holy No: Worship as Subversive Act* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018). "Take for instance the word 'homeless,' a word that is common parlance when describing those who live on the street or live in a shelter system. Assumed in the word 'homeless' is the idea that without a home, a person has no place to belong and therefore lives outside the mutuality demanded of community. As outsiders, the 'homeless' are either ignored or the object of charity. They are very rarely seen as collaborators in the creation of a home. Yet the unhoused of Boston are not homeless; they have a home, it is Boston."

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this community has reduced this woman down to her diagnosis. And if the language he uses makes you a little queasy, that means you're paying attention.

So how does Jesus treat this woman? To get back to our "God acts, people respond" thing, how does Jesus act? He interrupts his sermon, walks over to the woman, and says, "Woman, you are free from your ailment." Jesus heals her condition. It's pretty straightforward. It happens in just a few words. But pay attention to what Jesus says when he does it. "You are freed from your ailment." Jesus doesn't say, "You are fixed." Jesus doesn't say, "You are whole." Jesus doesn't say, "You are normal." Jesus frees her from the ailment. He doesn't free her from herself.

Oftentimes when we read these stories of Jesus healing people, we think of them as Jesus taking broken people and making them acceptable to God again. As if people's illness, their mental health, their housing status, their addiction, or whatever else is separating them from God. That they can't be loved and cherished and nurtured by God unless they are fixed. That's a very sloppy way to read scripture. And it's not what Jesus is doing at all. Instead, Jesus is saying that the experience of human suffering is worth his time. It's worth paying attention to. It's worth the interruption. How does God act? God deals with suffering. And God sees us as people of worth. That's how God acts. That's how God always acts.

But how do the people respond? This is the interesting part. Well, we have two very different responses. First, we have the synagogue leader. And he responds by taking issue with what Jesus has done. He's very upset by the whole thing. But notice that the leader of the synagogue doesn't oppose the act of healing itself. He would probably say he is pro-lifting up women with ailments. In fact, some of his best friends are women with ailments. He takes issue with the way it is being done. "There are six days on which work ought to be done," he says. So "come on those days and be cured." The important word here is "ought," which comes from the Greek *dei*, meaning "necessity." What he's really saying is, *This is not necessary. Can't we do this tomorrow? She's been like this for eighteen years, surely she can put up with another day.*

This is one common way people respond to the movement of the Holy Spirit. One way people respond to God's actions and intentions. Whenever there has been any movement in our country, in our church, or in our communities for progress, inclusion, and equity, this has been a constant refrain. This is a good idea. But do you know what would make it a great idea? Doing it later.

Usually people dress it up in more self-righteous language than that. They feign concern about backlash. They fret about the culture changing too fast. They say they think it's a good idea, but you have to worry about what other people will think.<sup>2</sup> But at the end of the day, they all do the same thing. They see someone's problem and think, *I don't have to deal with this right now. So I won't.* We treat our own problems as urgent. And we treat other people's problems as extracurriculars.

You can only talk that way when you don't see other people the way you see yourself. You see them as somehow less deserving or less worthy or less good. And sometimes it's literally about how you see them. It's not a coincidence that because the woman can only see the ground, the synagogue leader never has to make eye contact with this woman. When you don't have to deal with the humanity of this person, it's very easy to say that we can take care of their problems later. It's a lot harder to say it when they are looking right at you.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Petri, "You Have to Think About Electability," *Washington Post*, April, 25 2019. "I think sexism, racism, and homophobia are just about the worst things going. I don't have a single relevant bone, organ, or cartilaginous area in my body. But, of course, some people, you know, *do*, and it pains me much as I am sure it pains you that the average voter I am picturing is very much invested in all these terrible phenomena."

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But how do the people in the crowd respond to God? They rejoice. They respond the same way the woman does. And pay attention to something else happening with the crowd. How does Jesus introduce the woman to them? When we were introduced to her earlier in the story, she was “a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for years.” But when Jesus reintroduces her, she is “a daughter of Abraham.”<sup>3</sup> Basically another way of saying she’s a child of God. And guess what? She’s always been a child of God. Even when she was sick. What’s different is that now everybody knows it. Jesus wants to make sure that everyone in that synagogue knows that this woman is a child of God. And she was for all eighteen of those years, too.

Who is healed in the story? It’s the woman. But it’s also the people in the crowd who rejoice. Because Jesus is showing them things they’ve never seen before. It’s like suddenly the whole world is opened up and it’s overflowing with abundance. Because when you see people the way Jesus does, suddenly the whole world becomes filled with gifts. These people I thought were just statistics or problems are actually people who are made in the image of God. They are the means by which God’s grace enters the world.

If we are called to point people to God’s redeeming work, if we are called to be an instrument working for justice and peace, if we are called to be a foretaste of the city of God, then we need everyone’s gifts. There is too much hatred in the world for us to equivocate about people’s worth. There is too much cynicism in the church for us to give into hopelessness. And there is too much despair in our communities for us to procrastinate away our calling.

Whenever we push people away and tell them come back another day, Christ says, “They are necessary.” So are we all.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>3</sup> Beverly Gaventa, “The Self Witness of the Risen Jesus,” in *Reading the Gospel with Karl Barth*, ed. Daniel Migliore (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).