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Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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

Today's gospel gives us what seems like two very opposing images. The first image is of a woman whose body was bent over, causing her not be able to stand up straight. For 18 years, this woman spent her days staring down at her own feet and the dusty sandals of those around her. In order to see the sunrise or look someone in the eye, perhaps she had to twist her neck around in a painful way. Maybe she experienced difficulty breathing and even heart problems from the way her body was bent over. Maybe this led to feelings of frustration, vulnerability, or isolation. In verse 16 of this gospel, Jesus even calls what she was experiencing Satanic bondage. Certainly, her suffering doesn't seem like a reality which would lead her to rejoicing.

And yet that's the second image in this gospel text – that of rejoicing. Both the woman and the crowd rejoice at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing, perhaps dancing and laughing and spreading joy all around like the picture on the front cover of our bulletin. After Jesus heals the woman, she joyfully begins praising God. And after Jesus puts to shame the leader of the synagogue who chastised Jesus for healing on the sabbath, the entire crowd rejoices.

But those seem like 2 mutually exclusive realities, don't they? One that includes suffering and one that includes rejoicing. Maybe this is something you relate to. Maybe your own body has ailments or challenges which cause you suffering and make it very hard to find joy when you are in pain or discomfort. Perhaps when you are suffering you have to consciously choose whether the suffering will take precedence or whether there is any goodness the suffering can bring about.

Father Richard Rohr touched on this in his daily meditations this week about suffering:

“Suffering,” Rohr says, “can lead us in either of two directions: (1) it can make us very bitter and cause us to shut down, or (2) it can make us wise, compassionate, and utterly open, because our hearts have been softened, or perhaps because we feel as though we have nothing more to lose. Suffering often takes us to the very edge of our inner resources where we ‘fall into the hands of the living God’ (Hebrews 10:31), even when we aren't sure we believe in God! We must all pray for the grace of this second path of softening and opening. My opinion is that this is the very meaning of the phrase ‘deliver us from evil’ in the Lord's Prayer. In this statement, we aren't asking to avoid suffering. It is as if we are praying, ‘When big trials come, God, hold on to me, and don't let me turn bitter or blaming’—which is an evil that leads to so many other evils.”

As Rohr alludes to, prayer does not always lead to freedom from suffering. Yes, in today's story, Jesus freed the bent over woman, presumably because he was trying to send a message to the temple leaders that the needs of people were more important than sabbath law. But for many of us, suffering and rejoicing remain distinct and separate.

So I'm inviting you to wonder along with me today, how is it possible to find joy even when we are suffering? How can suffering, as Rohr says, make us wise, compassionate, and utterly open? I think we can look back at our scripture texts today to find some clues.

First, remember that this was a sabbath day when people would come to the synagogue for teaching and prayer that this gospel story happened. Jesus was present in the temple that day, and as he was teaching the woman who was bent over entered the temple. Now did you notice that the woman didn't come up to Jesus asking to be healed. It was Jesus who noticed her. Jesus saw her and called her over and announced her release, that she was free from her ailment. Then he placed his hands on her and she stood up straight and found joy. It was merely because the woman walked into the synagogue that day that she encountered the healing and freeing power of Jesus. She found joy just by showing up.

We can rejoice that Jesus meets us here, in this place, and even online. Just by showing up to church, Jesus notices us and what is weighing us down, without us even saying a word. We can rejoice that we are seen and known and understood by Jesus, who encounters us in word, water, bread, and

wine. We can find joy merely by showing up, because when we do, we are assured that Jesus sees us and meets us in the realities of our ailments and challenges. Jesus approaches us with healing and love.

And then notice why the crowd at the end of the gospel story rejoiced—it was not because they themselves had their own ailments cured. Certainly there were people in the crowd who had physical and emotional challenges that Jesus didn't heal that day.

But instead they rejoiced because one of their own—a daughter of Abraham—had been cured by Jesus. They rejoiced when they saw what Jesus had done for someone else. They rejoiced because Jesus was making people a priority over rules. They rejoiced because justice and mercy won out over injustice and oppression.

We can find joy, too, when others who are burdened or oppressed experience freedom. Even if we ourselves are not the ones who experience it right now, we can rejoice when, as today's psalm says, "O Lord, you provide vindication and justice for the oppressed." Being part of the body of Christ means that we find joy when someone else finds joy. That is how our own suffering can lead us to more compassion and openness—when we can rejoice for others' freedom even as we ourselves have not yet experienced it.

And it's also when we participate in God's work to bring about equity and justice for someone else that we can find joy. According to our reading from Isaiah today, "If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday." We can bring about our own cause to rejoice when we help someone else find joy, find justice, find hope, and even find food.

And, ultimately, we can rejoice in the midst of suffering simply because God has overcome sin, death, and the devil and frees us from the burdens of our consciences and hearts.

Did you notice that in this gospel, like in so many other places in scripture, that Jesus overcame what he says was Satan binding this woman, to bring about freedom and new life. Jesus always wins over every evil force in this life and the next. Jesus is more powerful than any burden in your life.

No wonder the psalmist sings:

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless his holy name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's (Psalm 103:1-4).

Whatever burden you carry, whatever weighs you down, God is willing new life for you. Jesus meets you just by showing up. There is cause for rejoicing even in the midst of suffering. And for that, we give thanks to God. Amen.