

August 24, 2025
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
“Daughter”
Luke 13:10-17

The curvature of her spine was so severe that she could see nothing more than her own feet and the dust beneath them. She could not raise her head. Not to tip her head back to sip water. Not to look for the morning star. Not to catch a glimpse of the unusual prophet preaching on the steps of the synagogue that Sabbath day. This is to say that it is entirely possible that the woman had not looked into the eyes of another human being for years. Her whole being was imprisoned by the infirmity, and it became a visible and cruel metaphor for who she was – the crippled woman.

And though the burden pressing her face toward the ground was invisible, the people who brushed past her in the street would be quick to tell you that she must have done something to deserve such a life. Surely the guilt of some unspeakable sin was the cause of her suffering. Surely her spirit was as crooked as her posture.

It's not surprising that the woman did not approach Jesus in the synagogue. Maybe she assumed he would not help her on the Lord's Day; maybe she figured she was too far gone. Maybe she was trying to figure out how to address him while staring at the all-too familiar ground. Whatever stopped her from grabbing his cloak or crying out for his attention didn't matter. Jesus saw her. This bears repeating. *Jesus saw her*. He addressed her. He called her to him. She could feel all those eyes on her, eyes that hadn't fully registered her presence in nearly two decades. All those eyes that she couldn't see with her own hidden eyes. Surely there were tears in her eyes.

When Jesus spoke to her with words of healing meant just for her, he must have sought out her eyes. When you tell someone something that really matters, you instinctively focus on those windows to the soul. Jesus didn't descend from heaven to earth to stop halfway in his preaching and teaching and healing.

If Jesus was going to heal this woman properly, he had to do what was necessary to look her straight in the eyes when he spoke the words that would liberate her. He would have had to get down on his hands and knees, wouldn't he? As I imagine this story, I imagine him crawling into the space forged by the right angle of her body and craning his neck to meet her surprised gaze.

Luke doesn't say he did this, but Jesus often goes to undignified lengths to find and free the beloved children of God from their rusty shackles.

Such is the depth of divine love. Such is the perseverance of the God who sees.

And the woman was free. Free to raise her gaze from the earth to praise the God of the heavens, who had sent this savior to crouch by her feet and release her from her suffering. The woman was free to lift her head and her voice in unexpected and unconstrained thanksgiving.

But there's something else going on in this story. The disgruntled synagogue leader was making a different sort of noise. He tried his best to drown out the jubilant celebration, but nobody listens to the referee at a time like that. Yet Jesus did listen. Jesus released himself from the grateful grip of the woman he had unbent to answer the man who was furious that the Sabbath rules had been bent in the process.

His words for the man weren't nearly as gentle as the ones he spoke to the woman. And so it is with God; the humble get a better deal than the hypocritical. The synagogue leader had enslaved himself to the Sabbath.

He worked very hard at not working. He turned the labor of rest into a more strenuous task than those that filled the other six days of the week. At sundown on Friday evenings, he braced himself for an obligation. Although his tradition was rich with descriptions of God's abiding love for his creation, the man had reduced the Creator of all that breathes into a loveless taskmaster.

He may have loved God with all his heart and soul and strength and mind. But he also believed with all his heart and soul and strength and mind that God was offended that this woman's back had been straightened on the Sabbath day.

Jesus disagreed. There was no better day to heal than that sacred day of rest, for God pursues the weary and heavy laden. God is not a loveless taskmaster but a loving Parent. By releasing the woman from her burden of suffering, Jesus invited her to experience the gift of Sabbath for the first time in eighteen years. I'd call that honoring the Sabbath, and the God who commands it.

And did you notice what he called the woman when he defended his action to the synagogue leader? He did not call her by her infirmity. He did not call her a sinner or a cripple. He called her by her true identity: daughter of Abraham.

In doing so, he restored not only the integrity of her spine, but the dignity of her spirit. She was somebody's daughter, indeed, one of the descendants that God had promised to Sarah and her husband.

I'd love to imagine this is a tale of two healings, that the disgruntled synagogue leader also got his spirit bent back into shape by the Messiah.

After all, he was every bit as misshapen as she was, although you might not know it passing him on the street. He was full of fear: that he had to earn God's love, that he would never be good enough, that his life depended on his ability to maintain control. And he'd turned his fear against his community.

He used his power to enforce his vision of a God who would callously let a woman suffer to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath. But maybe he wasn't someone Jesus could heal by looking in the eye and speaking a word of liberation.

At the end of the story, Luke reports that the man was humiliated. He was filled with shame of a man who has just been smacked in the face by something he didn't believe existed. A fairy. A leprechaun. The grace of God. Grace just can't be gentle with some folks. But no matter how grace shows up, in tenderness or in storm, it forgives and heals just the same.

I hope the synagogue leader accepted the jolt of grace and let his heart be transformed into a heart that could truly love God and honor the Sabbath.

This story is pure gospel. Isn't it wonderful news that Jesus Christ came to lift up the lowly and topple the hypocrites? And the depths and heights he took to get his point across. Not just the day he knelt to look a broken woman in the eyes. The night he shared broken bread with his friends. The morning he let his own body be broken at the hands of sinners he would be the first to forgive. The daybreak he broke the chains of death to say, once and for all, that God has the last word. So much brokenness, always and ever moving toward wholeness and healing. This story of wholeness and healing is pure gospel, for the Lord and Savior at the center of it is pure gospel.

This story doesn't end with brokenness, isolation, fear, humiliation.

The story ends when all the people are frenzied with thanksgiving, shouting alleluias and singing praises to the God who loves, forgives, restores, redeems. So, thanks be to God, Alleluia, Amen.