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This way forward

COMFORTING THE AFFLICTED... AND AFFLICTING THE COMFORTABLE

Luke 13:10-17

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There are a number of ways we could begin as we think about this passage. We could talk, of course, about Jesus. We could spend time on the woman, and certainly on the ruler of the synagogue. There's the crowd, and the question of the place of rules and systems in life. We'll get to some of that over the next few minutes, but I'm going to take a risk and start in perhaps a surprising place. There's an elephant in the theological room here, as it were, and its Satan, sometimes in the gospels also referred to as "the Evil One".

We know that in what we might call popular religious culture Satan is seen as a caricature, or even a cartoon. It's hard to take a cartoon seriously. And yet, you don't have to be very old at all to realize that there's something wrong with this world. People treat each other badly, often for no reason, some get sick while others do not, some seem to be lucky in love, others not, some are rich or privileged and we wonder how this should be so, there is heartbreak, etc. etc. The church has long had a word for this: *evil*. Evil makes us meaner, sicker, more selfish while good, or God, helps us be kinder, more gracious, generous, and so on. A confession—for a time I really didn't believe in evil, at least not in the ways I had heard the church describe it. When you've had an easy life you can think that way, at least for a while. But as I have grown older and seen more, I have changed my mind. I will never forget the afternoon of 9/11, sitting in my office trying to concentrate enough to pick out hymns, anthems and solos for a worship service we were trying to put together for that evening. As I was looking through music I came across a copy of *Dies Irae* from the Requiem Mass. *Dies irae* means, literally, day of wrath, or day of judgement. I had always felt this particular portion of the Mass was archaic. But looking at that music, with the knowledge that people had hijacked planes, killed the pilots and steered them into buildings, and with images of the twin towers collapsing fresh in my mind, the *Dies Irae* seemed very real. Evil seemed very real. It was not a just a shortcoming, or an error in judgement, or chance, it was on that day a *presence*.

One metaphor for evil I've found helpful is that of a weed in a garden. Anyone who's ever tried to grow anything knows that a weed will take whatever territory it is allowed. If there is no impediment it will cover the ground, and even if flowers are thriving it will seek their space. Weeds will attach themselves to flowers, sometimes in subtle ways so it's hard to know they're even there, and if left unchecked they can choke and kill beautiful, well-established plants. If left unchallenged weeds can and will take over an entire garden. Evil is like that weed. "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil", said the philosopher Edmund Burke, "is for good people to do nothing."

That's one way to think about it. But more recently I learned another. Last summer in my chaplaincy residency at Spartanburg Regional I had the good fortune to spend time with folks from the Pentecostal tradition. My new Pentecostal friends had a way of referring to evil as a burden. A here's what was striking...I noticed it mattered far less to them than it did to me whether the burden seemed to self-inflicted. In other words, being sick or doing something wrong were both a burden, and you lifted the burden in the same way...you worked through it with God.

This leads us to the subject in today's story, the woman bearing the burden of a physical infirmity. You can almost feel the weight of it in Luke's description: "she had a spirit of infirmity...and was bent over and could not straighten herself." Jesus himself referred to her as someone who was bound, or burdened, by the Evil One. So it seems my Pentecostal friends' concept of evil as a burden has strong biblical roots. And there's another element that makes me believe they're on to something—if my chaplain residency taught me anything it is that

physical troubles have spiritual ramifications. Often the spiritual burdens seemed more painful than the physical ones. This concept was well-understood in Jesus' day, but an unfortunate outgrowth of that was a pernicious popular belief that physical infirmities were the result of spiritual deficiencies. To put it plainly, the woman was ill because she deserved to be. Imagine bearing the double burden of being seriously ill and at the same time being condemned as the author of your own illness. Jesus rebukes this whole notion explicitly at the beginning of John 9, and he does so implicitly here, because he heals the woman without her even having to ask. Presbyterians should love that part. The idea of God as the author of grace no matter what we do is part of the Presbyterian DNA. So we have the woman, burdened for years, released by the sheer grace of God through Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, we have the ruler of the synagogue. Some translations call him the president. In that position he would have been a highly-respected figure in the community. He would also have been a sincere and serious practitioner of the faith. It's his job to run things on the Sabbath, but this itinerant preacher has shown up and even before the healing has probably stolen the show. I would like to think our ruler was basically a good guy, because it's too easy for me to put myself in his place. I imagine it this way: another choir director shows up at one of my rehearsals and essentially takes over. And not only takes over, but quickly leads the choir to musical heights the likes of which none of us have ever seen. I really should be happy, but I'm not. I'm humiliated. This conductor broke the rules. No director tries to take over another director's rehearsal. It's not right. It wasn't done "decently and in good order." I try to tell this to the choir, but they're not listening to me. That's actually fairly normal but in this case it's because they're too rapturous over what's been accomplished. And the conductor turns to me and says "Isn't the point here amazing music? You have said that's your goal, and now you have it. Your choir is ecstatic. Shouldn't you be overjoyed instead of angry?"

So we have our two principal characters...let's say that Jesus, ex officio, presides over the drama. What can all this tell us about the kingdom? A lot, I think, but we'll stick with three main points:

First, we learn that the burden of evil comes in many forms. In the case of the woman, it's both a physical and a spiritual burden, and like a weed in unprotected soil it has overwhelmed her. In the case of our ruler it's more like the weed that has wrapped itself around a seemingly healthy flower. That's probably most of us, isn't it? We think we're healthy and whole, and then, suddenly, we're the ruler of the synagogue, petulant and petty at best and harmful at worst. We don't recognize ourselves. As Paul said, I do the very thing I ought not to have done, and do not do the thing I should have done.

Second, the fewer personal resources we have, the greater God's grace through Jesus Christ seems to be. The woman in the synagogue is debilitated in every sense of the word, and she is healed without having to do a thing. For those with personal resources, though, the story is a little different. Is there grace out there for our ruler? Absolutely. But before he can access it he has to understand that he too is bearing a burden. Once he does, it is then up to him to do the work of learning and repentance. This story in one form or another permeates the gospels. The more you need help, the more ready Jesus is to help you. The more you think you don't need any help, the bigger challenge he presents. In other words, if you are afflicted, Jesus is there to comfort you. If you are comfortable, you should probably prepare to be afflicted.

Third, in the Kingdom of God expect the unexpected, and don't be too tied to the rules. In the Kingdom of God a woman sick for 18 years is suddenly healed. In the Kingdom of God a longstanding prohibition against work on the Sabbath is thrown out. In the Kingdom of God the most significant birth in history is shown first to the lowest members of society. In the Kingdom of God the last workers to the vineyard get paid the same as the first ones. In the Kingdom of God a son runs through half of father's fortune and his dad throws him a party. Heck, maybe preachers sing and singers preach.

I'm making assumptions about those of us together today in this room. I'm assuming we feel the kingdom is placing a claim on us, and I'm assuming that if we identify with one of the characters in the story it's probably with the ruler of the synagogue. The next step? Listen to Jesus. I know this is not as easy as it sounds. "Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear" is a call to engage ourselves, not just today but day after day in the great work of becoming part of the kingdom. There are ups and downs, distractions, epiphanies and roadblocks. But over time, quoting Paul, "He who began a good work in you" will bring it to completion. In a moment you're going to hear one of Handel's wonderful arias from *Messiah*. When Tom gets to the section "For He is like a refiner's fire" you will hear the weight of the challenge the kingdom presents. But I hope you'll also hear in the vocal line the process of refining that Jesus promises. Serving as the subject of the refiner's fire is not always the most comfortable place to be. But, in the hands of a master refiner, the product is beautiful. May that be so for each of us.