**Luke 13: 10-17**

**10**Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. **11**And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. **12**When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” **13**When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. **14**But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.” **15**But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? **16**And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” **17**When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

Today’s theme begins with Jesus teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. While Jesus was teaching, a woman appeared in the Synagogue, with a severely bowed spine, such that she was unable to stand up straight, and Jesus cured her. Experts in Jewish law had earlier objected to Jesus’ curative work on the Sabbath, and now the chief administrator of the synagogue indignantly censured Jesus. He was not concerned with the effect on the liberated woman, he believed a wider principle was at stake, nothing less than the rule of biblical law, related to the injunction to keep the Sabbath for rest in one of the ten commandments.

In the past, many communities have maintained strict rules about Sundays, and I have vivid memories as a child of what we could and could not do on a Sunday. I remember no movies at the cinema, shops and hotels were closed and our local dairy was heavily restricted in what they could sell. I remember as late as the 1990’s some American colleagues who worked with Gillian came to a BBQ at our place, and they were embarrassed that the sale of alcohol on Sundays was banned. I remember, we had some German people stay with us, and our next-door neighbour had the irritating tradition of mowing his lawns at 8am on a Sunday morning. They said that back home in Germany, he would be arrested for disturbing the peace. In many communities, nobody was supposed to work on Sundays. I expect this attitude came from the thought that, if God rested on the Sabbath, so can we.

But hold on, their Wives, Mothers and Grandmothers were still expected to prepare enormous Sunday dinners! Of course, that’s different, apparently women’s work was not really work! Thank goodness most of these restrictions no longer exist in New Zealand, although, there are still times like Easter and ANZAC day where restrictions still apply.

Like the ailing woman in this passage from Luke, many of us have seen the forces in life that can cripple us. We have seen parishioners burdened by the weight of grief, sadness, loss of work, economic woes, the failure of important relationships, or the inability to meet their own goals or others’ expectations.

This weight can literally cripple and bend us over – we can see the pain in faces, in slumped shoulders, and in the broken rhythms of life. This ill-health taxes all of one’s abilities to cope, and people can lose a sense of hope and promise.

There are those crippled by devastating physical diseases, diseases that make our bones crooked and leave us, as the woman in Luke, “bent over.” Those who are bent know diminished freedom and individual power. Such illness requires remarkable adaptation to survive in the “healthy” world. These days, to revive us and give us health and freedom, we seek doctors, clinics, and hospitals. But without such modern facilities, this woman went to the synagogue. She did not appear to come asking for anything. She did not call out to Jesus – in fact, Jesus called out to her. She came because despite her physical challenges, that’s what she did on the Sabbath, she came to worship God.

Jesus also reaches out and calls out to all of us. Our opportunity, like that of Jesus, is to look about us and see. We can see those crippled by a spirit of despair, and we can offer help to them.

People come to churches on Sundays for many reasons, like the woman in today’s text. They come, because that’s an important part of how they worship. They may also come because they live in hope, or because they simply have nowhere else to turn. So often, people arrive with the feeling that their life is defined by their own brokenness, hurt, fragility or ailment. The Sabbath invites us people here to participate in a much bigger story, about the way of God’s healing world. We can be set free in many ways, for such work is of the Lord. We give praise in response, that we can participate in this healing work. We know, as in this Gospel story, that we can all be set free and given wholeness, purpose, and promise through Jesus Christ.

But the chief administrator of that synagogue indignantly saw things differently. To heal is considered work, and therefore, Jesus was working on the Sabbath. Jesus firmly rejected this moral logic, not because he repudiated the Sabbath law, but because of how he interpreted it.

These were the rules, this was what they had always done, and any change like this by some new upstart like Jesus, was what we would call the thin end of the wedge. But the leader and his colleagues failed to see that Jesus had taken the greater initiative in releasing the women from pain and suffering. Jesus then intervened in the argument with some common sense, by pointing out, that if it is permissible to enable animals to get what they need for survival on the Sabbath; is it not also permissible for this woman to get what she needs? If such life-sustaining Sabbath work is acceptable on behalf of animals, then why shouldn’t this poor woman be considered at the very least akin to animals and set free from her burden. Love and care for others should not be restricted to particular days or places.

She needed, well actually, we all need the freedom to continually praise and thank God for all the blessings we receive. What better day of the week to praise God than today? The Sabbath invites us to live the first day of the week as if the last day will still be in the fullness of God’s kingdom.

Through the story of this crippled woman, we can understand that Jesus invites us to join with her in celebrating our freedom by appreciating God’s mighty acts of healing wherever we may be. Perhaps this means befriending someone, or caring for the less fortunate in our community, or mentoring a child with challenging circumstances, and doing this when the need is shown, not just when it is convenient, or not in conflict with something else. Perhaps this also means truly accepting the gifts God gives us through our relationship with Jesus, and being as thankful as the woman in today’s text, knowing God works in us all the time, if we let him in.

Amen