



Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
August 25, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man was flying solo across the south Pacific when his plane crashed and he ended up stranded on a desert island. He was stuck there by himself for a year and a day until, by chance, a passing naval vessel saw the smoke of his campfire and stopped to rescue him. When the rescuers came ashore they saw that he had constructed a hut to live and two other buildings – each with a cross on top. The rescuers asked the man, “what’s that building with the cross on top” and he said, “oh, that’s my church I built.” So they said, “well what’s that other building with a cross?” and he said “oh, that’s the church I used to belong to.”

I was reminded of this joke because part of the context of what we’re seeing in our gospel and epistle readings this morning is a kind of denominational split within Judaism. The ministry of Jesus proved to be so radically different from the ministry of other rabbis of his time that it set up an almost unresolvable tension within the Jewish community. In the gospel text we see that the conflict is over the Sabbath: what it means, why God created it, and how to honor its intention. And, actually, there is a very similar tension in the Hebrews text: what the author is describing when he says that we have not come to a place of terrifying gloom and darkness is the story of Israel at Mt. Sinai when the Sabbath was revealed to them. He sets up a compare and contrast, between the fear of the people at Sinai and the joy, grace, and freedom that he says we should experience in coming to Christ at Mt. Zion.

As I’ve thought about these tensions and contrasts I’ve found myself fascinated by this comment that Luke makes almost in passing: he says that the woman had a *spirit* that had crippled her. Two sentences later Jesus calls it an “ailment” or an “illness” as he heals her. What fascinates me is an intersection that isn’t often found in the gospel stories of Jesus’ healing. It is an intersection between a spiritual problem and a physical ailment.

Usually in these healing stories it is one or the other. Either the person needing help has a spiritual issue, usually described as demonic possession, that is manifesting in mental health problems or the person has a

physical ailment with no clear cause. I'm thinking here, for example, of the man born blind of whom the disciples asked "who sinned to cause him to be born blind" and Jesus replies that sin has nothing to do with the man's physical ailment.

But here, today, we have a somewhat unusual story in which we are told that a spiritual issue is manifesting itself in the bodily symptoms of an illness. This is a phenomenon that is well known to psychologists and doctors in our time as well and continues to be studied. It's the connection between our minds and our bodies, between our souls and our physical health, in which stress, unresolved emotion, and trauma can all produce a variety of health problems – from raising blood sugar and blood pressure to digestive problems and fatigue.

It might be wise for us to think about how this soul/body connection can play out in our lives as well. It is interesting, for example, to compare the woman's experience in being set free from bondage to spiritual forces with the leader of the synagogue who seeks to impose a form of spiritual bondage on her, Jesus, and the whole community. In essence Jesus asks him, "how did you get to this place in life? How did you get to a place where you value rules over relationship, bondage over freedom, and control over the gracious gift of God?"

It seems to me that one of the lessons of this story is that we need to be aware of our spiritual and psychological health if we are to truly experience life as God intends it to be. To neglect our spirituality – or, like the synagogue ruler, to seek to suppress and control our spirituality – can create dire and disastrous consequences in our bodies and in our communities. Ultimately this repression and neglect of our spiritual selves can lead to division. Our souls become divided from our bodies, our faith communities become divided and split because of issues such as the rules around Sabbath observance, and our joyful future in Christ can be hindered by the gloom and fear of past shadows cast by whatever Mt. Sinai looms in depths of our psyche.

Let me offer a more specific example to try to be clearer in what I'm talking about. Inside every one of our heads are recordings that play on a daily basis. Some of them are very useful: "look both ways before crossing the street", if you ever catch on fire "stop, drop, and roll," and "eat all your veggies before you have desert." Some of the recordings that play are more trivial, like "don't wear white after Labor Day", "drink red wine with red meat", and "don't talk with your mouth full."

But some of the recordings in our heads are no longer healthy or useful. They were once healthy and useful – and that's important to acknowledge and appreciate – but they have outlived their usefulness. For the synagogue ruler there is a recording playing in his head that says "be very afraid of doing anything on the Sab-

bath that looks like work.” That recording was once useful because it helped him see God’s intention to bless humanity, but now it has become a life killing edict that is actually blocking him from seeing how God wants to bless humanity in Christ. Likewise the recordings that the author of Hebrews alludes to: once it was helpful for the people of Israel to be startled and taken aback by the sheer power and otherworldliness of God’s existence, but now that Christ has revealed the depth of God’s heart for humanity those old recordings from Mt. Sinai are hindering that particular group of people from entering into the joyful wonder of Mt. Zion and their life as the adopted children of God in Christ.

What about you and me? What recordings are playing in our heads about sin and righteousness, good and evil, God and humanity, that might have been useful when we were children learning to pray, or teens in youth group, or young parents, but now are hindering our ability to enter into the fullness of God’s joy and grace given to us in Christ? My years in pastoral ministry, and my own personal self-examination, tell me that we all have such recordings. And we are all, to some extent, experiencing the tension, division, and struggle that such recordings create because they have outlived their usefulness. My life experience also tells me that it is different for all of us and there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

I would say simply this – to you and to myself; find times and places to still your soul and quiet your mind from the roar of 24/7 news cycles, social media, and the voices of our culture that have a thousand different expectations for us. Find times and places to still your soul and quiet your mind and say in the words of the Hebrew prophets: “speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” When we do this we have the chance to stop listening to what everyone else has told us about God and the chance to begin to hear the voice of Christ in the Holy Spirit speaking to us of love, inclusion, grace, and of “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and” of “innumerable angels in festal gathering, and” of “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.”

Amen.