

“Fully Alive in Christ”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 26, 2026

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Psalm 23

Luke 13:10-17

*A Curriculum of Love: Deepening our Love for God, our Neighbors,
and Ourselves: Week Eight*

When, in Luke’s gospel, Jesus first announced his mission – also in a synagogue and also on the Sabbath – he described it in terms of human liberation and flourishing. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he said, “because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (4:18-19) There is hardly any part of Luke’s gospel that does not point back to this messianic manifesto of a fully restored life.

It is true certainly for this story about the healing of a woman stooped over for eighteen years. This is not – at its core – a theological debate about the origins of illness and physical deformities. Sometimes, according to Luke, these are due to the hand of “Satan” and at other times due to natural causes. His stories allow for both positions; there seems to be no general rule.

But this story is not told in order to resolve that theological issue. Rather, it is about the role and function of religious traditions and claims about what could and should be practiced on the “Sabbath.” It is about who is allowed within the walls of religious communities and whether the ways we practice our faith can become a hindrance to inclusion.

In this story, Jesus teaches that concern over the suffering of fellow human beings – their healing and liberation – takes precedence over obligations related to keeping the Sabbath.¹

In a world that prioritizes attention, one does not have to work hard to go unnoticed. Just think of the toddler who vies for the affection and attention of her parents, saying *look at me*. In a home with a dozen devices, she pines for their

¹¹ R. Alan Culpepper, “Luke” from *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary*, vol. IX

undistracted attention. Or a middle-aged man who walks into a break room and sits down with his coworkers. They do not acknowledge him; nor do they invite him to join the conversation. He is with them, but alone. Or the teenage girl who posts a selfie on social media. None of her friends click “like” or write comments. Their silence is deafening. Perhaps, she thinks, they are sending her a message without sending her a message.

Almost no one chooses to feel invisible, unseen. Yet, those who have felt this way, or made to feel this way, are certainly not alone. This woman in Luke’s story, the one bent over for 18 years, understood the pain of invisibility all too well. She likely knew it better than most.

She had a chronic disability in a time and place when a significant portion of religious people associated physical illness with God’s judgment; a condition that probably caused her neck and back pain, stiffness, inflammation, fatigue, difficulty breathing, and, potentially, feelings of vulnerability, frustration, and isolation.

This woman would have also faced challenges on account of living in a patriarchal world. At the risk of oversimplifying the matter, she lived in a society in which the voices, needs, and rights of the men were typically privileged; while the voices, needs, and rights of the women were usually ignored. Like the woman in last week’s story, who suffered from a bleeding condition for 12 years, this woman’s options and resources were likely depleted.

So, she endured two types of pain: the psychological pain of being rendered invisible in her community and the physical pain of having a long-term debilitating condition. We do not know whether she suffered silently or loudly, but we do know her pain would have been great.²

Jesus encounters this woman after he had concluded his Sabbath teaching. Women were not permitted inside the sanctuary of the synagogue at that time, so he had to seek her out; to see her when no one else does. Luke says, “When Jesus saw her...” Throughout his ministry, Jesus had his eyes trained to see those who were forgotten, left out, unnoticed by others. And then, we are told, Jesus “called her over.” The God who sees us is the God who calls us. She was outside the synagogue, on the periphery, invisible at one moment, and seen the very next.

² Jared Alcantara from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Over the past few weeks, in the course of our discussions about *A Curriculum of Love*, we have been looking at loving ourselves; how, because God loves for us is unconditional, we need not feel ashamed of who we are or afraid that God will abandon us. At those times when we feel invisible, “when we do not love ourselves fully,” series author Siri Stroman says, “We will always feel depleted, looking for validation, acceptance, praise, and purpose from others. But rarely are we given what we need. Without realizing it, our relationships with others can be about getting what we need more than mutually giving and receiving. It is only when,” she reminds us, “we accept God’s love within us and learn to love ourselves that we can truly love others without expecting anything in return.”³

The synagogue leader, in his role as a teacher of the Law, objects to Jesus having healed on the Sabbath. The commandments forbidding work on the Sabbath leaves the exact nature of “work” undefined, allowing for various interpretations in ancient times and today. A list in the *Mishnah Shabbat* of 39 kinds of labor forbidden on the Sabbath includes such tasks as baking, hunting, sowing seed, writing, building, and leading from one domain to another.⁴

Jesus does not spare the synagogue leader or mince his words. He calls this man and others like him “hypocrites” and unleashes a classical rabbinical argument: If one is willing to unbind an ox on a Sabbath day and lead it to water, how much more should you be willing to unbind a woman who was bound by Satan for 18 years? An animal, yes, but a person, no? One day? What about 18 years? Should she not be set free and made fully alive, even on the Sabbath?

Jesus’ healing mission never waits for an allegedly more appropriate day. If the bent-over woman must be straightened on the Sabbath, then there is no time at which human healing should not and cannot occur. Jesus sees the woman and calls her forward. He does not take her into a side room of the synagogue for a private healing. He engages and heals her in front of everyone, which allows her – maybe for the first time in those long 18 years – to look her neighbors in the eye and praise God face-to-face with other worshippers.

So, with the woman’s healing comes restoration for the community. Her neighbors now see her more fully. By straightening the woman to see them, Jesus

³ Siri Stroman, *A Curriculum of Love*”

⁴ Carolyn Shap from *WorkingPreacher.com*

grants them a fuller vision of the woman so that, in the end, “the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”

This is a story about community. It asks us to consider, *what kind of community do we want to be?* In what ways do our religious traditions help us to become that kind of community, or do they hinder our ability to see and accept and include others? Do we, indeed, love ourselves fully enough to love and welcome others – both those inside our community and outside, beyond these walls?

For those who know what it is like to feel invisible or unnoticed in a world that struggles to pay attention, remember: when others do not see you, Jesus sees you. Those whom Jesus sees, Jesus sets free. Like the woman in Luke 13, you too can stand up straight and be fully alive.

And like the crippled woman he encounters here, Jesus feels sorry for the way we are bent over and not living the life God intended for us. Jesus came to free us from all that binds us so we can be fully alive. In John 10:10, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” This is not a God who is criticizing every move we make or who wants us beating our chest in guilt and fear. Jesus came with Good News. Do we believe it?

Let us pray: *Jesus, where there is darkness in me, bring light. Where there is despair, whisper hope. Where there is doubt, inspire faith. Where there is shame, offer grace. Where there is guilt, grant mercy. Transform us to love ourselves so that we can love others, and thus be fully and abundantly alive. Amen.*