

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer. *Amen.*

A sage wandered the countryside, and as he passed near a village was approached by a woman who beseeched him to help a sick child nearby. He went to the village and a crowd gathered around him, for such a man was a rare sight. The sick child was brought to him, and he said a prayer over her. “Do you really think your prayer will help her when medical care has failed?” yelled a man from the crowd. “You know nothing of such things! You are a stupid fool!” said the sage to the man.

The man became very angry with these words and his face grew hot and red. He was about to say something, or perhaps trike out, when the sage walked over to him and said: “If one word has such power as to make you angry and hot, may not another have the power to heal?” And thus the sage healed two people that day.¹

Today’s story about the bent-over woman is just one of many Gospel lessons that focus on the life and ministry of Jesus Christ during this long season of what the Church calls “ordinary time.” These are stories about how his band of believers grew from the first disciples to enormous crowds that followed him wherever he went. By the time Jesus approached his Passion, there were so many people who wanted to see and hear him that he had to teach them from a boat offshore or climb up on a hill in order for everyone to hear what he had to say. The stories we hear now are the same stories they heard and experiences they shared, illustrations of Jesus’ teaching, healing, and working miracles in God’s name, that give us consistent examples of how we should act and react to a variety of circumstances in our own lives. What we hear today about the healing of a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years is an example of the mercy and grace Jesus’ brings to the lives of those who seek him and seek to follow him. ... But it’s not the whole story.

There are other consistent elements in the lessons Jesus teaches us through the stories of his life and ministry, and one of those is the presence of his enemies. The Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes seem to dog his every move. In most of the stories we hear, one or all of these groups is somehow present, and on occasion the conflict between them and Jesus is an important part of the story. Today we hear the leader of the synagogue criticize Jesus for curing a woman on the Sabbath. He isn’t criticizing Jesus for healing her. The problem is that Jesus healed her on the day set aside for the Lord, a day of rest when worship is the only activity permitted by their rules of religion.

The concept of Sabbath is rarely observed in our time—I don’t know anyone who observes it. But we still find today’s conflict almost ludicrous, because Jesus was doing God’s work, and we know that’s not something we should reserve for just six days of the week, any more than we should reserve worship for just one day of the week. Worshipping God and doing God’s work should be part of our lives *every* day of the week.

There are other things that draw *me* into this story. I’ve been told by people who know about such things that what we find distasteful in other people and what we criticize in them often speaks to something in ourselves, either something we are but would rather not be, or something we would like to be but aren’t. That’s not what we particularly want to hear, but it’s really not very hard for us to find similarities between ourselves, as church-going Christians, and the synagogue leaders of ancient days. We like to have things done particular ways—all of us—and when there’s deviance from those ways it often disturbs us. We are closed to change, and we become critical of difference

¹ Synthesis, Year C, Proper 16, Tradition, August 21, 2016.

and those who represent it. There's a part of us that cheers when we read that "all of [Jesus'] opponents were put to shame. Yay Jesus! You tell 'em!

But then there's that other part of us, especially those of us who have been church members for decades, who completely understand our Lord's critics. There is a particular way, a specific time and place for church things and sticking to the specifics and the particulars makes us feel like we're doing things the right way, thereby making us comfortable. In that respect *I* am the leader of the synagogue who sometimes wants to drag St. Francis back to the proper practice of our faith and traditions, despite my strong belief that many of our practices have been dictated by the church and not by our Lord. I know there are those of you who agree with me on both sides of that argument. But we must concede that Christ's church is in a time of change and with it we are remembering to value Christ's ways, which often have nothing to do with the church's requirements.

Yesterday I stepped into that role of leader of the synagogue as I visited with Bryson Peacock's mother and godmother and gave them what I call the "obligatory baptism talk." This morning Bryson will be baptized into the Body of Christ at St. Francis, the third child to be baptized here in the last two weeks. He is the third generation of his family to be baptized here and the fourth generation to have his name recorded in our Parish Register as a member of our church. His great grandmother, Ruth Henson, told me yesterday that she has been a member of St. Francis for more than seventy years. Despite the fact that this family has deep roots here, it's my responsibility to remind Bryson's sponsors that the vows they are making are serious. They will promise to see that the child being baptized will grow up to know Christ, and I believe the best way to make that happen is to become part of a church community, an association with people who will assist in giving him an understanding of who Christ is and how we are called to live as he did. The talk I gave them is like the talk I give the sponsors of all children coming here for baptism. What I've learned over the years is that just because I give them the talk doesn't mean they will follow my advice.

As the "leader of the synagogue," that concerns me greatly, so much so that in a conversation with Senior Warden Stephanie Williams, I expressed my sadness about it and wondered aloud whether we should expect more of baptismal parents, maybe a series of baptismal classes or something. In her deep wisdom, Stephanie took the other side and reminded me that as priest, parents, godparents, and congregation, we can do only the part which we have been called and promised to do through our vows to support the child being baptized. When we make those vows, we acknowledge that we are reliant on God's help to keep them. And God is more than capable of drawing children to Christ and giving their parents the opportunities for that to happen. And so we trust that through our prayers and promises, Bryson and all the other children who are baptized at St. Francis and elsewhere, will know at the deepest level of their being that they are beloved of God.

That's what happened to the bent-over woman in today's Gospel. After suffering for years, she met Jesus and her life was changed forever. William Willimon, Bishop in the United Methodist Church, points out that we don't even know her name. Willimon says that in this encounter with Jesus, her life has been renamed.² Always a child of God, though she may have never known it, at that moment of healing, she became a follower of Christ, a Christian. So it happens in baptism. Neither Bryson nor the other children who, through their baptism are named Christians, know what lies ahead for them. But God knows.

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;

God knows.

Amen.

² Synthesis, Year C, Proper 16, Tradition, August 22, 2010.