

August 25, 2019 Pentecost + 11 c VA Luke 13:10-17

After spending some time with today's Gospel lesson, I came to think of it as a war story. Again and again in the Gospels, we see Jesus battle against the forces of evil that afflict our world. If we look carefully at today's lesson, we can see how one of these battles unfolds. We might be able to learn some things that can help us in our own battles against evil.

As the lesson began, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath. He was in a place of prayer and learning, on the day that God had set aside from work. By teaching, Jesus presented his unique vision of what the rule of God is all about. His vision was radically different from those of the Roman and Jewish governments, the rebels, and the religious establishment.

As he taught, Jesus saw a woman who was "bound by an evil spirit for eighteen years" with a physical affliction. This does not mean that all illnesses are the result of demonic attacks. But Jesus had the spiritual insight to recognize that this one was.

This woman came to the synagogue, on the sabbath, when Jesus was there. Yet, this evil spirit still held her, defiantly flaunting its power in his face.

Quickly, Jesus rescued this woman from her oppression. This is one of the very few times that Jesus performed a healing without first asking, "Do you wish to be healed?"

He had compassion on her, but this healing was about more than her. It was about defeating the enemy who was afflicting her.

In this way, Jesus taught by his deeds. He demonstrated that he had the divine power to defeat the evil in this world. Jesus showed that the rule of God in its fulness would bring healing and abundant life for God's people. Where better than in the synagogue, when better than on the sabbath to demonstrate the mighty power of our loving God in an act of healing?

Then this woman stood up straight and began praising God. More than her body was healed. Her spirit was healed as well. So now she was more able to glorify and to serve God.

As the saying goes, "No good deed goes unpunished." Immediately, there was a counterattack from the ruler of the synagogue, somebody who was supposed to be an ally in God's war against evil. Ironically, the weapon that he used was God's Law. He said that Jesus surely could have waited just one day, so as not to break the sabbath. After all, this woman had waited for eighteen years. How could Jesus claim to serve God and break God's law at the same time?

In all fairness, don't we understand that respect for God's Law is a good thing? Aren't we relatively law-abiding citizens, even if some of us may go slightly over the speed limit? Don't we teach our children to obey the rules?

The ruler of the synagogue was playing it safe, following regulations, and re-establishing his own authority --- as so many of us do in the church, at work, and in society.

In this lesson, we can see how a spirit of evil sometimes works. Evil can use a good thing for a bad purpose, like using respect for law to oppose the healing of this woman.

Even reasonably good people can get so confused that they do some pretty bad things, for what they think are some pretty good reasons. Like the ruler of the synagogue, their spirits can be just as bound as this woman's body was, but without them even realizing it.

As we see, Jesus was ready for the new front in this battle. He knew God's Law pretty well himself. He knew that there were legal exceptions for animals. So, why not recognize the same kind of exception for a human being who had suffered for eighteen long years? Why make her wait even one more minute to be freed from an evil affliction?

Again, Jesus was teaching. The sabbath was a day when people could dedicate themselves to praising the Lord and learning his ways. The sabbath was a day when people could be trained for God's war against evil. "The sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the sabbath," as Jesus said at another time.

Jesus knew the basic principle that God's purpose for the sabbath governed how the rules of the sabbath were applied. So, when was a better time for this victory over evil?

Today's Gospel lesson concludes, "And all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him." They celebrated a victory on their own battlefield.

So, what about us today? I have a few thoughts.

First, we were baptized into our Lord's special forces. We share in his mission of fighting the evil and suffering in our world. God can use our words and our deeds, small and insignificant as they may seem to be, as ways to bring his rule into our world more and more each day. As we see in today's Gospel lesson, God often

rules through human acts of compassion. So, we can offer our deeds of love as channels for God's grace, so that our Lord may act through us, in whatever way he knows to be best, as he saves our world.

Second, in order to be part of God's victories over the evils that are around us, it's best for us to stay close to Jesus. We can stay close to Jesus through hearing his Word, receiving his Sacraments, frequent prayer, and working together with his people to witness and to serve those in need.

Evil is close. So, keep Jesus closer, for inspiration, guidance, and protection.

Third, staying close to Jesus can help us to recognize the ways that evil cripples people today, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The closer we are to Jesus, then the more we are likely to see people through his eyes and follow his ways of compassion, forgiveness, and sacrificial love for others.

Always, we do well to keep repenting of our own sin and to keep asking God to heal and enlighten us first, before we try to fix other people. Staying close to Jesus can keep enlightening us so that we'll be more of a help than a hindrance for God's final victory.

We seldom may see dramatic miracles like the one in today's Gospel lesson. It's our job simply to offer our faith and our love for our Lord to use as he will. We can offer what we can, the best we can, in the certain hope that the Lord who died and rose from the dead shall win the final victory over all of the powers of evil and death.

Amen

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