

Why We Can't Wait
Luke 13.10-17
August 21, 2016
Pentecost +14C
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

There is a great power in seeing and being seen. Not just noticing a perfectly shaped cloud or a fragrant gardenia as you go about the stuff of daily life, but truly seeing the thing before you and the entire world it contains. Jesus saw that way. He saw the lesson in a fig tree and a mustard seed, the grace and peace of a lily and a sparrow. He walked and taught, touching a grape leaf or an olive branch as he passed by and spun a new yarn about the secrets of life hidden in all these things.

He saw people in the fullness of their beauty and brokenness, seeing everything good and true, everything latent and waiting to be born, and everything that holds back and slows down. He saw that sometimes people are their own undoing—throwing roadblocks and obstacles in their own path. He saw the fear in their eyes beyond the smiles and social graces. He saw the people—so many, too many—held back by invisible systems that limit and restrain no matter how deeply a person may want to be free.

He tried teaching about this way of seeing and knowing and encountering the depths of the life and world before you every day. But so often it seemed the ones who couldn't see the world with sighted eyes were the ones who saw more closely on his level than those gathered around him as he taught on the Sabbath. He painted word pictures, he told stories, he took the ordinary and blew it open with unexpected twists and turns, but so many still couldn't quite understand this world within the world that he described.

Because he was a noticer and a seer, he immediately saw this woman as she made her way through the synagogue that day. Groups gathered around in clusters, rabbis teaching, prayers being offered. She shuffled slowly, bent in a perpetual yogic forward bend that kept her eyes on the ground at all times. Though Jesus had been in this synagogue many times, teaching and listening, challenging and meditating, he had never seen this woman before. Her presence stopped him mid-sentence as she made her way forward in silence.

She did not move as one who was in great need. She had a power and strength about her. She was silent as she entered that place, hope and quiet confidence radiating from

her stooped posture; as though she sensed today was a changing kind of day. Jesus saw her and was drawn to her. He stopped teaching and made a bee-line for this sister to set her free. He laid his hands on her, maybe one on her rounded back and the other on the top of her head. "Woman, you are free." And everything about her knew today was the day that God moved and the Spirit blew. For the first time in 18 years that forward bend turned into a sun salutation as her arms neared the earth before swooping up to raise her hands straight above head. She did it again and again—back to that old forward bend of almost two decades, dipping down even lower than before, and rushing up toward the sky with the next breath, her spine lengthening with each return to her new height.

"She began praising God," the story goes. The gratitude and joy spilling out of her. With each breath and twist and loosing of her spine, she felt the loosing of her self—free at last to move and run and engage the world. Free at last to be present in her community. Free at last to contribute to the world and see the faces of her neighbors. Free at last to be seen as herself—to be seen by this man, Jesus, as fully woman and fully human. Praising God became her breath, in and out constantly, the gratitude unending. She saw the world now as she had heard it. And because she listened for all of those years, she knew so well the world beyond and within everything she could see. She was set free.

Of course, not everyone was happy about this scene. Today was the day for teaching. Jesus was messing with the schedule. Healings don't happen until tomorrow. This woman wasn't following the guidelines any better than Jesus was. They should have both come back another day for all of that scene-stealing drama. And that's when the story pivots. These faithful ones, the ones who unlock the doors in the morning and make sure the room is swept and candles burning, the ones who show up week after week to arrange the room just so and say the prayers and hear the teaching—they couldn't see. They found such comfort in the routine, such comfort in the arranging and welcoming, such comfort in being in that space together in a particular way with particular rules and particular guidelines, that they couldn't see God moving beyond the world that they protected so fiercely.

They argued with Jesus, "Couldn't this wait until tomorrow? This isn't the way we do things here. This isn't right. You are interrupting everything. This is OUR day, and you should have told her she had to wait because she didn't belong here today."

I imagine Jesus smiled and took a slow, cleansing breath. God bless him, he gave it another shot and tried to turn this into a teaching moment for those routine-clinging, ritual-loving, faithful ones. "Friends, don't you take care of your business at home on

the Sabbath? Don't you offer yourself some flexibility within your own faith practice? Don't you accommodate your own flaws and quirks? You are willing to offer grace to yourselves but not to the ones in our midst who desperately need it? You're willing to bless and forgive your circle of friends but not the ones waiting at the edge to be welcomed in and set free? Don't you realize you are wasting your time here if the prayers you pray aren't opening you up to the breadth and height and depth of God? No, she isn't coming back tomorrow. The love of God cannot wait. The kingdom of God is bursting out right here, right now in every corner. The prisoner, the captive, the blind, the widow, the orphan are crying out right now to be seen and heard and known and set free. No, we can't wait until tomorrow. The kingdom of God is right now."

Some of the faithful ones just shook their heads. A few whispered to each other, "All he had to do was tell her to come back. Why is he so upset about this? He really doesn't understand how we do things here." But everyone else in the room erupted with cheers, ran and hugged this woman, thanked Jesus for the way he was expanding their minds and their hearts. The same unfolding, unending gratitude the woman felt began rippling out in that place as more people began to see what Jesus was seeing.

"When God is up to something, prepare to be unbound," says David Jacobsen, "whether from confining diseases, or social norms about persons with disabilities, or even holy pieties. The fact that Jesus does this *within the Jewish tradition and for a daughter of Abraham* shows that God keeps showing up, drawing the circle just a little wider and unleashing a divine horizon that begets rejoicing over the loosing of every human bondage. We who gather around the Table should not be surprised. There, sometimes despite ourselves, we glimpse the great and glorious thing that God is doing, celebrate that space that is there for all, and give our thanks and praise. The God who shows up does not lead us out of our fellowship, but more deeply into it... with others and with a Jesus who is committed with his very journey to the strange thing God deems necessary," to set us all free.¹

What can't wait, friends? What can't be wait to be set free and undone? What crooked, bent things in our midst need to be lifted straight toward the sun? What structures in our church, our community, our world need to be repented of and touched by Christ that we might be loosed for the world within this world? Healing, presence, justice, kindness, widening the circle, setting another place at the table, welcoming, loving, seeing is for now. It's for today. We are made for this work, shaped for this way, born to be healers and seers like the Jesus we follow.

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2956

Let's hear the challenge Karoline Lewis offers, "The world needs us, Dear [Church]. The world needs to see that the ways of the church mean willing to heal on the Sabbath. To call out the hypocrites. To name evil where you see it alive and well. To release the captives even in the face of righteous indignation. All for the sake of those who for too long have been bent over by the systems that perpetuate bondage; to say to them, 'stand up! for you are truly the daughters and sons of Abraham.'"

We need the same healing this woman received, "Once only able to stare at the ground, only able to get an alternate view by straining her neck for some sideline sight, only able to look at her own feet or those of another and never into their eyes, now she can see faces. Now she can see where she is going. Now she can see that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Not that she didn't see that before, but it's different when the love of God becomes incarnated in your very self," Lewis writes. "She is now able to see what and who Jesus sees -- who needs to be cured. Who is in bondage. Those who are bent over with the weight of a world that continues not to care."²

This is our work. This is our calling. This is the challenge of our lives. May we see and be seen. May we set aside our comforts and open our arms. May we bring healing to the whole wide world as we praise God without end. Amen.

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4699>