

Faith in the face of Opposition
August 21, 2022
Luke 13:10-17
Rev. Laurie Crelly at East Church
Grand Rapids MI

This sermon was partially acted out by three members of the congregation (see where noted below). You may find it informative to also watch the recording on YouTube to see how the actors interpreted the story. Go to www.eastbhurchgr.org and find the Click Here button for viewing worship services. Sermon begins at 25 minutes in.

Yesterday at the wedding I did the couple had picked out a lovely passage from Colossians 3. The beginning of the passage is simply lovely, and I want to read it to you from the Message Translation:

“So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It’s your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.”

I love that image of getting dressed as God’s chosen ones. We recognize people often by the clothes they wear and with it comes a list of general expectations that come with it. Not always accurate, but we still expect a certain way of being.

For instance, when we see someone in a lab coat, we expect a logical scientific mind, a very smart and insightful person, maybe a bit of the nerd is ok. We may identify them as a doctor, a clinician, a pharmacist, or a scientist.

If we are in a big box store and we seen someone with a blue or red shirt and tan pants, depending on where you are shopping, you may be more likely to approach them and ask for assistance. Now I like to wear a blue shirt and tan pants so I get mistaken often as such an employee, but I still try to help people out even after I say, “Oh I don’t work here.” That’s just who I am, I guess.

So let me ask you. Is this a list that you identify with when you consider the term Christian? We expect a Christian to be compassionate, kind, humble, a quiet strength, quick to forgive, even tempered and above all else loving? Are those the characteristics of a godly person? Yes of course that is, we say that because we see it in Jesus, right? If you are a follower of Jesus or call yourself a godly person, then you are expected to exhibit the characteristics most associated with God.

In today's reading from Luke, we have two people who are both seen in the community as godly people, rabbis or leaders of the faith community. Jesus and the leader of the synagogue are seen as equally qualified as godly people here. They both start out as expected, but then things change.

So to bring this story more to life I need three volunteers to dramatize these three characters, Jesus, the leader and the woman. I have some props here to help. (if you are reading this you will need to imagine and feel the emotional parts of the narration to follow).

First, I am assuming, that the leader of the synagogue is warm and welcoming to the community and Jesus. I make that assumption because Jesus is offered the privilege to teach the people. It can also be assumed that leader may have seen it as a high honor and a boost to the synagogue to have this popular healer and teacher speak at his synagogue. There may also be a little apprehension because rumor has it that Jesus also likes to heal on the Sabbath which was not allowed at all. But the leader cautiously allows Jesus to teach the people.

Now Jesus is also gracious and kind teaching the crowd and proclaiming his message of love and forgiveness to the people. People are being inspired by the message. Then one particular person catches Jesus' attention. A woman who is struggling to see the Rabbi as he is teaching pushes her way toward the front to see Jesus. She is not seeking a healing or anything, she just wants to see who is speaking.

Jesus sees her maybe even acknowledges her presence with a quick smile and continues to teach. At some point, we don't know why, Jesus calls the woman forward. Now the leader of the synagogue is maybe getting a bit nervous. Everything is fine if he is just talking but now things may get out of control.

The woman doesn't know what is about to happen so, unsure she is the one Jesus is calling forward, looks over her shoulder and says, "who me?" Jesus smiles and gestures again for her to come forward. Maybe it is at this point that Jesus hears her story and hears her say that she has been diagnosed with a spirit that has caused her to be stuck this way for eighteen years. Jesus reaches out to touch her shoulder, a sign of compassion and empathy and simply says, "Today you are set free of your ailment."

As the woman begins to stand up and rejoice, giving God glory for healing her and the crowd is applauding. However, the leader of the synagogue quickly comes forward to try and take control of the situation. He doesn't want things to get out of control and have a bunch of people healed on the sabbath, he reminds the people that although it is great that this woman is healed, God really expects us not to allow such things to happen on the sabbath. He tells the people that healing on the sabbath is wrong, but if you want to be healed, then come back tomorrow.

The people fall silent and are confused by their leader's reaction. I mean, who wouldn't be happy that this woman is finally healed of her ailment after 18 years? Then Jesus yells:

You hypocrite! You fake! You trickster! You Player! – (these are all the meanings of the word hypocrite in Greek). Jesus then turns to the people and asks how many of you untie your animal and lead it to water on the sabbath. Why? Why is it ok for you to break the sabbath to make sure your animal is watered? That is an exception to the sabbath law but healing a daughter of Abraham is not? Since when is showing compassion on the sabbath forbidden?

So, who is clothed in the garments of God now? Who is clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline, even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense?" Is Jesus still clothed with love right now? What about the Leader of the synagogue?

Who in the story is the real chosen one of God? And Why?

Were Jesus' harsh words and yelling hurting or defending? Were they justified?

Why doesn't the leader of the synagogue want people to be healed? Why was he so upset that this miracle happened? Really?

(thank the actors and ask them to return to their seats)

As we sit back and ponder this question who was really clothed with love at the end of the story? I want to leave you with this statement I heard this weekend.

I heard this snippet from a podcast talking about religious trauma in the Christian church. I see a parallel between what the leader of the synagogue is doing and what this critique of the present-day church that many people are speaking out about and why many people say they are leaving the church.

Why isn't there motivation within Christian church spaces to create emotionally healthy Christians? It's because you can't control what's healthy. If you want to create a culture that is controlling, you can't create healthy people because healthy people are not going to bend to your will every time you tell them to do something. I have to wound you and handicap you and make you walk with a limp so you can use me as a cane.

(From Holy Smokes Cigars and Spirituality Podcast S6 E12 by Rev. Kristian A. Smith.)