



## **SETTING OTHERS FREE**

Luke 13:10-17 August 22, 2010

Pilgrim Bud Precise

The faithful gather for a restful Sabbath service. Worship most likely would be well attended. There would be a welcome. A psalm would be sung – mostly likely by the congregation. The attendant for the service would remove the scroll from the tabernacle and take it to the person doing the reading for the day. In this case, it would be Jesus. Jesus reads the lesson for the day. Just a regular Sabbath service. All is peaceful. Then Jesus acts. In the congregation is this crippled woman who is bent over, unable to stand up straight. I suspect that over the years she has become accustomed, if not resigned, to her long and serious illness. For 18 years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see at a glance. She is unable to look up and see the sun. She knows only the dust and dirt beneath her feet. She would struggle to see the path and would strain and twist because she cannot look up. She does not ask to be healed. Jesus calls her to come and he lays his hands upon her. Her response is to stand up straight and she begins to praise God. She is set free. From her bondage.

But the leader of the synagogue is offended by this. The devoted are outraged at this “desecration” of the Sabbath. Jesus notices, embraces, frees, saves, a suffering person on the margin of society – and the gathered faithful despise him for it. The issue is Sabbath rules – what constitutes work on the Sabbath. True – the woman has been bent over for 18 years. “Jesus, just wait until the Sabbath is over!” But Jesus will have none of it. “You hypocrites. On the Sabbath you – each one of you will untie his ox or donkey and lead it to get water. Yet you are upset that this daughter of Abraham has been set free from bondage on the Sabbath day.”

Now, I often wish we had more appreciation for the value of Sabbath keeping. Maybe we could give up shopping on our designated day of rest. Even turn off our cell phones. Let emails pile up for a day. There is wisdom in honoring a day of rest and reflection. It would take discipline to keep it. But here the leader and righteous in the synagogue have missed the point of the Sabbath. They are put to shame.

But today I do not want our focus to be on the bad behavior of the leader of the synagogue and those bound by rules so tightly that they can’t even show compassion and mercy. I think of what today is in our church. I believe it is a day to emphasize the act of Jesus setting the woman free. Yes, it is my last Sunday to preach as pastor of Pilgrim – the great



honor I have had for almost 8 years. But it is not a day to dwell on the past or hold up examples of things we should go back to. To me, it is a joyous day, not a sad day. For over 3 years, we have been on the road that would lead us to September 5<sup>th</sup> – the first Sunday of our full time pastor. To me, that journey has been challenging at times. It has been filled with decisions. It has been a sacred journey. It has called us to reach beyond ourselves toward a future that includes Pilgrim Church. I see today as a day to celebrate the future, Yes, I know that sometimes it is easier to want to cling to the past – it is familiar, it is what we know, it is dependable. But this setting others free calls us to the future.

Let me tell you a story that helps me think about today.

An old man enjoyed sitting on a park bench. He brought bird seed to feed the pigeons and other birds. He loved to watch them and spent good time enjoying this experience most every day. One day, a young man, maybe college age, sat down on the other end of the bench. He was fiddling with his I pod, or some sort of electronic device. Finally he noticed the old man watching him and the birds. “I bet you don’t have one of these,” he said to the old man. “No, I really don’t” came the answer. The young man asked, “What did you have when you were my age? I bet nothing like this.” The old man answered, “No, there was no I pod when I was your age. There were no cell phones. There was no computer, no internet. We had not gone to the moon. Television color was not very good.” The young man commented, “Well, you didn’t have much did you? What did you do?” The old man thought for a moment then he looked at the young man and said. “We invented all this stuff you have.” Then he looked the young man in the eye and said, “What are you creating to leave for the next generation?”

It is a good question for us today – for Pilgrim Church. What about our future” What are we creating for the next generation. We do have some direction and strength that I would remind you of. I hope we will build on that. And I believe there are ministries we have not even thought of yet that will be important for us and our community.

1. “Whoever you are, where ever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” We look at the text for today and we don’t want to be legalistic like the ruler of the synagogue. I tell you there are churches that are as bound up by rules as was the righteous of that synagogue. God has long quit speaking a contemporary word there. We have people around us who have given up on the church because they have been a part of a self-serving congregation and they are tired of it. They have been told exactly what they must do to be saved and be a member. We have people who have been condemned because



of their sexual orientation. We have churches not willing to accept people of another color in their membership. Jesus set this woman free. Part of the gift of healing is that it can open the doors in the rooms of our own lives. Healing encourages us to walk through these doors to discover grace, healing and even judgment that may be inside those doors. Our setting free comes from within – it is not just a ministry to the world, it is for us also. As we free others, we ourselves become free (I need to attribute that to Mandela!).

2. Another direction and ministry we have is education – for all of us and especially for our children. Did you ever sleep with a history book under your pillow the night before a test – hoping by some sort of magic to absorb enough knowledge to pass a test. I never tried that – don't believe in that sort of magic. Our children will learn the stories of our faith at home. They will learn them in worship and in Sunday school. We have only one hour each week for Sunday school. We are blessed with a great teacher. But when children come once a month, well, they are not going to learn much. When they show us thirty minutes late – it is a lost day for Sunday school. Christian education takes time and effort from all of us. I know of no magic way to make it happen. It will take work, time, commitment. If our children are to have faith, we must cultivate it. If our children are to have faith, we must join them as they try to make sense of what it means to be Christian. If our children are to have faith, we must make Christian education a priority.
3. Social justice. Let us not slack off of our commitment to the poor, the homeless, those who need a tutor at school. We opened our doors during the civil rights struggle to people of all races. We voted to be an Open and Affirming congregation. Our presence is important at the AIDS walk. The cooking food for the homeless at the firehouse shelter makes a statement about our faith. We bring our food for food bank at Greater Birmingham ministries and supplies for school children.

The church was located in downtown Tuscaloosa. This late-elementary/middle school student walked into my office. He sat down and said, “Mister, how do you get to come to church here? How much does it cost? What do you have that I can do?” Three really



good questions coming from anybody, and they are from this kid who is a stranger to me. At that moment the secretary called from down the hall about a long distance call we had been trying to make for a week about an upcoming event. It was the speaker. The phones were not working. I told the kid to let me speak to the secretary about the call and I would be right back. I was gone maybe 30 seconds. Told the secretary to take a number and I would call right back. When I got back to my office, the kid was gone. The only clue I had was he was wearing what appeared to be new glasses. I never found him. But his questions were real about ministry.

There are people who will come through our doors here at Pilgrim. They will see our sign saying they are welcome. Like that kid, they too will have questions about who we are and what we have to offer in ministry and how we can include them.

I want you to know that I am excited and hopeful about the future of Pilgrim Church. God calls us to a still speaking ministry of the spirit. Let today be about the future. Our text speaks of setting others free. Let us join Jesus in this effort to set others free. It just may be our calling for the future.