

God said "Look Around"

Sermon preached by The Rev. David Griswold, Deacon

St. Columba's Episcopal Church, Washington DC

August 21, 2022 Luke 13: 10-17

The congregation has gathered in the synagogue on the sabbath. Come with me and step into the scene. A visitor from Galilee will teach today. He is becoming known as an amazing healer with bold ideas about how we can see and feel the rule of God in new ways. We're curious to hear him.

While Jesus is teaching, the woman comes in and lingers near the door. She looks familiar, though we can't recall her name. We know nothing of her story except that some spirit-driven disease captured her body long ago. She is bent over, severely stooped down. She takes slow, halting steps. We regard her with pity but her condition renders her impure, so we keep our distance.

The woman makes no attempt to get Jesus' attention. Maybe she has heard of his healing powers, but knows that on the sabbath, such works are prohibited. Perhaps she has become so resigned to her condition that she's not in a hurry to approach Jesus. Or it could be that, weighed down by a sense of shame and insignificance, she doesn't want to trespass on the order and decorum of this assembly.

She does not interrupt Jesus' lesson. But he does. Seeing her, he calls her over, and we all turn to look. And while she moves hesitantly toward Jesus from the back of the room, we wonder about her life in a way we haven't before.

How must it feel to spend nearly two decades hunched over at waist level? How painful must it be? Who was she before this condition overtook her? What can it be like to look constantly at the ground, to see our feet but strain to see our faces, to struggle to look above the horizon and gaze at the sky? How does it feel to be treated so guardedly, to go through life without close contact with others?

As the room falls silent, Jesus says to the woman, "you are set free from your ailment" and lays his hands on her. Right away, she stands up straight and exults with jubilant praises to God. We can scarcely believe it! Eighteen years, hunched over – and now she stands upright. We see her face as if for the first time. Everyone is amazed and rejoices at what Jesus has done.

Well, not everyone. Our leader is upset that Jesus went beyond teaching by doing work here today. He scolds all of us for ignoring the rule against sabbath day healing. But Jesus answers him back: we unbind our animals to give them water on the sabbath – shouldn't this also be a day to set this woman free from what binds her?

The leader has no reply. He and his supporters go off looking flustered and ashamed while the rest of us celebrate. Jesus calls the woman a "daughter of

Abraham,” reminding us that she is a sister to us all, sharing in the promises God made to our ancestors. We want to hear more from this Jesus!

As modern listeners we can step away from the scene until the gospel calendar brings Jesus and this woman back again in three years. But the story stays with us. We can probably discover something of ourselves in each character--the woman, relieved of an overpowering burden; the leader, unable to look past the established rules to see God doing something new; the people in the crowd, rejoicing when a sister in faith moves from the edges of the community to full membership; and yes, even Jesus, whose boundless empathy and compassion reveal God’s liberating grace.

Standing upright in a life of privilege, I wouldn’t expect to feel kinship with the woman of the story. And yet I remember how it feels to be overpowered by a circumstance that kept me isolated from others. I’ve known the crippling burden of growing up gay in an era when this brought paralyzing anxiety and shame and was a source of anguish in family relationships.

For the first two decades of adult life, I hunched under the weight of a compromised identity – afraid to be fully known, frightened of the stigma attached to being gay in some parts of society and fearful of trespassing on other peoples’ ideas of what is “normal.” Living as a closeted gay person in the 1980s and 90s meant walking tentatively through life, looking at the ground and not seeing people face to face, and straining to gaze above the horizon to imagine having a happy and fulfilled life.

My Episcopal congregation at the time was gay-affirming. Yet even in that setting I allowed the larger culture’s deeply-ingrained messages that said being gay was wrong to limit what I shared about myself. I prayed for God to lighten a burden that I seemed to lack the strength to overcome. Over time, I began to sense God saying: “Look around at the people who are on this pathway with you. Trust them. Trust me.”

And one weekend in the mid-90s during Advent, I was at the Bishop Claggett Center in Maryland for a retreat with other parishioners--some I knew, others not. I’d enjoyed such gatherings before, though I hadn’t brought my whole self. As this one got started, something felt different – a sense of warmth settled over me, a paradoxical blending of calmness and edginess – as if Jesus had interrupted the agenda and called me over.

Seated in a circle, the group shared responses to an ice-breaker question like “tell us something no one knows about you.” When my turn came, I hesitated and found it hard to make eye contact. But finally, words came out: “I’m a gay man. I’ve known this about myself for a long time and felt I needed to push that part of me aside. But I know God loves all parts of me, and I’m grateful to be able to share myself with you.”

Then I took a deep breath and looked around as the others smiled, nodded and thanked me, making it clear that they were glad to have me as a brother in God’s family. I was the same person who’d walked in moments earlier, but everything seemed different – my body felt uplifted, as if out from under a painful load that had weighed

more than I realized. It felt as if I was being welcomed back to a familiar place after a long time away.

While I was glad that I had come out, it was God who had given me the courage to do so, and I welled over with thankfulness. There would be distance still to travel on the path to self-acceptance. But I'd made a start because, when the time and place were right, God acted to align my deep desire to live as my true self with the community's readiness to embrace me in love.

At the heart of "all the wonderful things being done" by Jesus (Luke 13: 17) is his power to help us to see one another not as the world might see us, or as we might see ourselves, but as God sees us. Stories of miraculous healing can offer a variety of meanings, but one I hope we can take away today is that Jesus wants us all to be free to live as God's beloved, and calls us to lead one another to that freedom.

If anyone asked us on our way to church this morning, "why are you going?" I expect few of us would say "I'm going in order to be set free."

Yet surely part of what draws us here is a desire to be liberated from whatever prevents us from flourishing as God's people— from illness or physical challenges that can seem to limit and define us; from loneliness, grief or anxiety that can isolate us and crush our spirits; from a sense of despair over the injustices that perpetuate suffering all around us; from the secular culture's assumption that life can best be navigated with tools the world offers and not by our relationship with a transcendent presence.

Jesus reminds us that God's work of liberation never ceases and that whenever the faithful gather, it is as a community of delivered people. In turn, we are catalysts for healing and liberation in all the ways we reach out to one another and as we follow Jesus into the world. The liberating energy of this community is all around us to be seen and heard in unexpected ways.

Just one of many examples comes from our ministry working with refugee families who fled from Afghanistan. A father told our Refugee Response team about the day one of his two daughters came home after attending school for the very first time. He shared what she told him: that this was the happiest day of her life. Just another school day for most children, but for her a day of discovery and rejoicing.

That liberating energy is here and wherever the people of St. Columba's come together as beloved people of God. Does it seem idealistic, even daunting to imagine how we'll know we're called to seek that liberating spirit for ourselves and to offer it to others? Perhaps it will come in a message from God such as the one that still speaks to me: "Look around at the people who are on this pathway with you. Trust them. Trust me."

And thanks be to God.