

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 21C, Aug 21, 2016
Luke 13:10-17**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

She is just a woman. We don't know her name, she doesn't speak, and there's little remarkable about her except that a spirit has crippled her for 18 years. Bent over, unable to stand up straight, off she went to the synagogue on that Sabbath day. She had likely done so throughout her life and even the persistent spirit crippling her doesn't cause her to give up her faith or her participation in the worshipping community. Did she know that Jesus would be there? How could she know that he would notice her and proclaim her free? Did she know that day would change her life? We don't know. Luke doesn't tell us much about this woman and yet here she is, quietly in the centre of a controversy.

But it's not her controversy. She doesn't ask for anything; she doesn't ask to be healed; she doesn't argue; and she certainly doesn't ask to cause a kerfuffle. She simply showed up at the synagogue on the Sabbath... much like you coming to church today. I wonder if you have come expecting to meet Jesus? What if you are noticed, healed, proclaimed free? What if today your life is changed with freedom from a crippling spirit?

In a book on Christian spirituality titled *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser describes a spirituality of the paschal mystery. He describes the mystery as "how we, after undergoing some kind of death, receive new life and a new spirit." (145) The paschal mystery is a process that leads to resurrected life, not just resuscitated life. Resuscitated life is when one is returned to a former life, living with a former spirit. Resurrected life, on the other hand, is wholly different... it is living a genuinely new and transformed life. "It is not a restoration of one's old life," says Rolheiser, "but the reception of a radically new life." (146)

We live this mystery by following the 5-fold pattern Jesus set out for us with Good Friday, Easter Sunday, the forty days leading up to the Ascension, the Ascension and Pentecost. In simple language, Rolheiser describes this process as: "naming your deaths; claiming your births; grieving what you have lost and adjusting to a new reality; refusing to cling to the old, letting it ascend and give you its blessing; and finally, accepting the spirit of the life you are, in fact, already living." (148)

We can be crippled by a spirit particularly near the end of the paschal mystery, when instead of grieving a loss and adjusting to a new reality, we cling to the old... never letting it ascend so that we can receive the spirit of the life we are actually living. Whatever the situation might be, whatever deaths or losses we experience, the spirits that cripple are those of bitterness, anger, greed, resentment, obligation, guilt, exhaustion. These are the spirits of one who clings to a dream, a relationship, health, youthfulness, a lifestyle or an idea... any former life, when those things are actually dead and gone. When we cling to an old life, we get weighed down, bent over, by spirits of victimization, exhaustion or self-pity.

But it doesn't have to be that way. We are living, right now, in the season after Pentecost... a new spirit is upon us, if only we can release the old and accept the spirit of the life

we have today, right now. But how? How do we do this? How can we let Jesus set us free from our ailments? Ironically, the key to happiness... is grief and mourning. As Rolheiser notes, “we have no other options because life, in fact, for all of us, is unfair. We have been cheated, dropped too often, never valued or loved properly. What we dreamed for our lives can never be.” (163-4) And so we must mourn... as Rolheiser quotes Henri Nouwen imploring:

“Mourn, my people, mourn. Let your pain rise up in your heart and burst forth in you with sobs and cries. Mourn for the silence that exists between you and your spouse. Mourn the way you were robbed of your innocence. Mourn for the absence of soft embrace, an intimate friendship, a life-giving sexuality. Mourn for the abuse of your body, your mind, your heart. Mourn for the bitterness of your children, the indifference of your friends, and your colleagues’ hardness of heart... Cry for freedom, for salvation, for redemption. Cry loudly and deeply, and trust that your tears will make your eyes see that the Kingdom is close at hand, yes, at your fingertips!” (162)

God’s kingdom is at hand – at our very fingertips. So close that a nameless woman could simply show up at the synagogue on the Sabbath, and receive a miracle. So close that each one of us who showed up today can reach out, and receive the same miracle... the miracle of freedom from a spirit that cripples us.

The movie “Freedom Writers” is based on a true story of a novice teacher going in to a declining school in war-torn (Long Beach) Los Angeles in the years following the Rodney King riots. On the first day of the second year of her English class, she invites her students to make “a toast for change...” It’s a toast expressing hope for a different future. At her invitation, one boy read the most recent entry in the diary she gave them the previous year:

“This summer was the worst summer in my short 14 years of life. It all started with a phone call. My mother was crying and begging, asking for more time, as if she were gasping for her last breath of air. She held me as tight as she could and cried – her tears hit my shirt like bullets, and told me we were being evicted. She kept apologizing to me. I thought “I have no home.” I should have asked for something less expensive at Christmas. On the morning of the eviction, a hard knock on the door woke me up. The sheriff was there to do his job. I looked up at the sky, waiting for something to happen. My mother has no family to lean on, no money coming in. Why bother coming to school or getting good grades if I’m homeless? The bus stops in front of the school. I feel like throwing up. I’m wearing clothes from last year, some old shoes and no new haircut. I kept thinking “I’ll get laughed at.” Instead, I’m greeted by a couple of friends who were in my English class last year. And it hits me... Mrs. Grewell, my crazy English teacher from last year, is the only person that made me think of hope. Talking with friends about last year’s English, and our trips, I began to feel better. I received my schedule and the first teacher is Mrs. Grewell, room 203. I walk into the room and feel as though all the problems in life are not so important anymore... I am home.”

He was not the only one in the room who knew what it was to be homeless or to struggle just to live. After a terrible summer, the worst of his short life, this boy showed up for school that first day, and he found a miracle... the miracle of home and family in the most unexpected of places – an ‘integrated’ school classroom in the middle of a race war. Crippled by spirits of shame, despair and hopelessness, this boy told his story to his friends. They laid their hands on him in embrace; freed him from what ailed him; and enabled him to stand up straight.

A nameless woman, crippled by a spirit for 18 years, shows up at the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus sees her, proclaims her free from her ailment, lays his hands on her and immediately – she stands up straight and praises God.

A young boy, crippled by a spirit of shame, fear and despair because of being homeless and living in a war zone, shows up for school. His friends see him and say ‘hello,’ he finds the courage to tell his story, his friends embrace him – and they all learn to stand up straight.

Sometimes, just ‘showing up’ is the hardest part. And on those days when it’s all you can do, it is enough for Jesus to work a miracle. We have all showed up here this morning. Maybe you came standing up straight already, or maybe you have come crippled by some kind of spirit. Even, or maybe especially, if you have come crippled by a spirit – of despair, of anger, of failure, of shame or of fear... what matters is that you are here. You are here and more than resuscitation, we can all receive resurrected life - new life. Here is where we can name our deaths and claim our births. Here is where we can grieve what we have lost and pray through the adjustment to a new reality. Here is where we can find the courage to refuse to cling to the old but rather let it ascend and bless us. Here is where a new spirit, the spirit of the life already among us, is ready to be received. Here is where we are called to stand up straight and praise God!