

# *You Are No Donkey*

Luke 13:10-17

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 25, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup> But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?” <sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” <sup>17</sup> When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17, NRSV)

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There was a guest preacher that morning, a young up-and-coming rabbi from Nazareth who had gained quite a following and reputation. We don't know the text or title of his sermon that day but it's safe to assume that his message was captivating. In other words, nobody dozed off or daydreamed that morning in synagogue. The leader of the synagogue, a man of great prominence in that community, had arranged for this rabbi named Jesus to preach. That was his job, to select those who would lead in prayer, or read scripture, or give the sermon. Perhaps he was a bit anxious as Jesus stepped into a pulpit. I know the feeling. You're never quite sure what a guest preacher is going to say.

Everything seemed to be going well until coffee hour after the service when an encounter took place between this guest preacher and a woman who had come to worship that morning. We know this must have been afterwards because women, especially women like this, were not permitted in the sanctuary of a Jewish synagogue. Still, she came as far as she could in order to participate in worship. Even that must have been a chore. Luke tells us that she was disabled, twisted in her body in such a way that she was literally unable to

stand up straight. She had been this way for eighteen years.

The fact that Luke, who was a physician, doesn't name her condition likely means that nobody really knew what to call it. He does mention, however, that it was a 'spirit' which had crippled her. Later on Jesus conforms that it was, in fact, Satan who kept this woman twisted and bound. One way or another, evil was at the root of her condition. Maybe a demonic spirit had taken hold of her; we see lots of examples of that elsewhere in the New Testament. Or maybe evil attacked in a more indirect way, through some physical or verbal abuse she had suffered years ago when she was younger which persisted until her twisted-up emotions worked their way out in her body. One way or another, this was a woman who was stuck under a weight from which she could not escape. It's a wonder that she came to worship at all. Nobody would blame her if she'd given up on God a long time ago.

It's a wonder some of you are here today. Though others around you might never suspect it, I know that there are more than a few of you here who live today under some crushing weight or another which has left you twisted and weary. If that's you, if this woman's past has been your past, and her present is your present, then I want you to pay special attention this morning because this woman's future can also be your future.

Everybody in the synagogue that morning would have been trying their best not to notice this woman. In a time when people believed that physical illness or disability was in some way related to personal sin, that this woman was somehow getting what she deserved, others would have kept their distance and averted their eyes. But not Jesus. Jesus noticed her that morning, just like I'm certain he notices you this morning. He seems to have a sixth sense for people like this, people who are at the end of their rope and know they are at the end of their rope. Understand, however, that this woman didn't come looking for Jesus. We are given no indication in the text that she has come to hear or meet the guest preacher that morning, or even that she knows who Jesus is. He notices her before she notices him, which is, by the way, how it always works.

Verse 12 reads, “**When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’**” What do you notice here? Jesus doesn't ask if the woman wants to be healed. Now, maybe that's

because it was obvious to him, and so he just heals her. Either way, he sees a human being who is suffering and immediately acts to relieve the suffering, to make right what is wrong, almost as if this was the only possible response he could offer.

It reminds me of that time at the beginning of his public ministry when Jesus was in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth one sabbath morning. At the appointed time he got up to read from the scroll of Isaiah these words:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the  
captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.<sup>1</sup>**

After rolling up the scroll and sitting down, he declared to all in attendance, **"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."**<sup>2</sup> Everybody knew what he was suggesting. He was claiming that these messianic prophecies pointed to him, that he was the Savior which God had promised to send to make everything wrong in the world right again. Of course that meant that later on when he met this twisted woman outside another synagogue one morning, the only thing he could possibly do was the very thing he had been sent to do, which was to set her free.

But again, don't miss the fact that Jesus does this on his own initiative. This is the gospel! God does not save us because we ask God to save us. God certainly does not save us because we deserve to be saved. No, in Jesus' interaction with this twisted woman we get a beautiful picture of Jesus' interaction with our twisted world. Christ did not come to give his life on the cross because we asked him to come. He certainly did not come to die because we deserved such a sacrifice! We did not notice God; God noticed us! And before we even knew who he was, Christ gave his life for us, even when we wanted nothing to do with him. Romans 5:8 declares, **"God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."**<sup>3</sup> From the cross, remember, Jesus cries out as he dies, **"It is finished!"**<sup>4</sup> In that moment his disciples had all deserted, betrayed or denied him, every one of them twisted by sin, and we would have done the very same had we been there, yet he still gives his life nonetheless and sets us all free.

Salvation, healing, forgiveness, life, all these are pure gifts of grace we are offered long before we ask to receive them.<sup>5</sup>

"Woman, you may not even know who I am, but I set you free." And then Jesus laid his hands upon her and at once she stood straight up, finally free from the burden which had crushed her for so long. And immediately a party broke out, right? Coffee hour at once turned into a joyous, raucous celebration!

No. The woman praised God, but apparently she did so alone, at least at first, because the man who thought he was in charge of the whole proceedings stopped it all from happening. He is pissed off. Forgive my language, but that's the best way I can describe it. The leader of the synagogue is pissed off. He's furious, wishing he would have listened to his instincts about inviting guest preachers. Immediately he turns to the crowd – no guts to face Jesus directly! – and demands, **"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day!"** This is church, for God's sake, on Sunday morning! Deal with your mess on Monday. Today is a day for putting on our Sunday best!

Do you understand what's going on here? The Torah, the law of the Old Testament scripture, commanded the Jews to set aside the sabbath day, every seventh day, as a day of rest and worship. As God rested on the seventh day of creation, so God's people should also rest to honor the God of creation.<sup>6</sup> Over time, all sorts of interpretations had grown up in Israel around sabbath rest, clarifications for the people on what activities qualified as work and should therefore be avoided on sabbath. Healing, apparently, was one of those prohibited activities. Heal somebody on Thursday, that's fine. But not on the sabbath; that day was for resting and honoring God.

And if you're paying attention you already see the problem. How in the world can a religious person come to the conclusion that it would not be honoring God to heal somebody no matter what day of the week it is? But do you know how religious people come to that warped conclusion? Because they forget what I already told you is true, that it is God who takes the initiative in salvation. That's the gospel! But religion is not the gospel, and so religion instead puts the burden of salvation on us. Instead of God noticing us first, we must notice God first and then do we all the right sorts

<sup>1</sup> Luke 4:18-19 (NRSV), citing words from Isaiah 61.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:21 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> NRSV

<sup>4</sup> John 19:30

<sup>5</sup> I think of Paul's words in Galatians 6:14: **"But as for me, may I never boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."**

<sup>6</sup> See Genesis 2:1-3

of moral and religious things we can possibly do, (i.e. follow all the rules) so that God eventually will notice us and say to himself, “Well now, there is a very impressive person who is worth noticing. I notice he is in church every Sunday and dresses the part in every way. I notice how she faithfully gives an offering every week and volunteers way more than other people I could mention. I notice he’s really trying his best to be a good person. I notice he’s at least working on breaking that one habit. I notice she’s trying to say only nice things about others. I noticed how his kids seem to be so well behaved, especially in church. I notice she’s putting in so much effort at her job. Yes, there is somebody who is certainly worthy of my attention.”

Let me remind you of something I hope you already know. We gravitate towards this heart position, every last one of us.<sup>7</sup> We convince ourselves that it is up to us to justify ourselves, to somehow earn God’s favor and love. The better people we are, the more we imagine God must be pleased with us. The worse we do, the more we sense God’s disappointment. Plus, when things don’t go well in life we wonder if perhaps in some way we might be getting what we deserved. Then, when we start imagining that God’s view of us depends in some way on our performance, the inevitable outcome is always deep insecurity. Because how do we know if we’ve performed well enough? In fact, the only way we can gain some level of assurance about these things is to compare ourselves to others. If I feel like I’m a more moral or religious person than you are, well then I may well come off looking comparatively good to God as well. This insecurity always comes out in pride and a fierce defensive assertion of our own righteousness and a defensive criticism of others. We have the right way to live, the right way to believe, the right way to worship, the right way to behave, and we are hostile to those who do not.<sup>8</sup>

Can you see why this synagogue leader is so furious when Jesus heals this woman for doing nothing! She didn’t even ask to be healed and clearly she was all twisted up in the first place because of some sin in her life. There is no way that she deserved to be saved and so when Jesus does save her he literally threatens the whole system of religion this man and others like him have set up to justify themselves before God. Which means, ironically, that he also is twisted and suffering under a heavy, heavy weight. He doesn’t look the part, but he’s really no different from this woman.

<sup>7</sup> Writer and pastor Tim Keller says this is the ‘default position of the human heart.’

<sup>8</sup> I’m heavily borrowing some language here from Richard Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (InterVarsity Press, 1979), 212.

Remember when Jesus earlier in Luke said to some other religious people like this, **“Woe to you...for you load people with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them.”**<sup>9</sup> What a heavy, heavy burden it is to live each day with the belief that you must perform a certain way in life if God is going to notice you.

This synagogue leader, in fact, is no more able to untwist and straighten himself out than is this woman. The only difference between him and her is that she is well aware of her crushing burden while he is pretending that his doesn’t exist, which is exactly why Jesus calls him a hypocrite. In fact, Jesus says that anybody else in the crowd who is like this man is a hypocrite as well. Picking up from verse 15,

**“You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”**

You go home from church and you see your donkey tied up out by the barn and it’s a hot day and you imagine that he must be thirsty and so you untie your thirsty donkey and you walk it to the well where it can satisfy its thirst. And you think nothing of it, even though technically, yes, it’s work done on the sabbath. But I bet you don’t care about your neighbor’s donkey which also stands there tied up in the sun. In fact, I bet if you saw your neighbor doing the very same thing you just did you would think to yourself, “Who does he think he is, untying his donkey on the sabbath day!” You just did the very same thing, but in your mind you’ve got all sorts of reasons why your donkey was more thirsty, and your donkey more valuable, and the way you untied your donkey took so much less effort...

Anybody here besides me ever catch yourself passing judgment on somebody else for doing the very same thing that you always do? Anybody here besides me ever wonder why the things we most quickly condemn in others are often the very things we most despise in ourselves? Isn’t it easier to condemn these things in somebody else? It’s certainly not nearly as threatening.

This woman is no donkey; she is a daughter of Abraham, a child of the covenant, one chosen and loved by God, a human being made in the very image of her creator. The fact that these religious people could show more compassion to a thirsty donkey than to a twisted and broken human being tells us everything we need to know. They thought it was *necessary to heal on another*

<sup>9</sup> Luke 11:46 (NRSV)

day because that's what the *Torah* commanded. Jesus made clear, however, that it was *necessary to heal on this day* because that's what *he* commanded. In doing so – don't miss this – Jesus is declaring the he stands above the *Torah*, a place that is reserved for God alone. This is something he did all the time by the way. Remember in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, over and over, **“You have heard that it was said [in the Torah]...but I say to you...”**<sup>10</sup> It was Jesus' way of pointing out our tendency to interpret God's law as something we try to follow to get God to notice us, a practice which leads us to follow the dead *letter* of the law. No healing on the sabbath! No exceptions!

But the deeper law of God is always love. Love is always the *spirit* of the law. I mean, didn't Jesus boil the entire *Torah* down to just two laws, that we are to love God with all heart, mind, soul and strength, and love our neighbors as we love ourselves?<sup>11</sup> Therefore, if following God's law ever leads you away from love then you can be certain that you are not following God's law. *You* would want to be healed immediately, even if it was the sabbath. You won't even let your own donkey go thirsty on the sabbath. So how can you think that it is not God's will for this poor woman to be healed immediately, no matter what day of the week it is?

Listen to me. There is only one thing that can set us free from this burden which crushes us and that one thing is the gospel. By God's grace we have to come to see that we do not have to perform in this life to get God to notice us. He has already noticed us. In fact, he noticed us first, and not only noticed us but came to give his life for us. We have been offered healing and freedom and life from Jesus long before we even knew who Jesus was. Once we believe this is true, not only do we find ourselves set free but we also begin to ache, as Jesus ached, to see others set free as well.

Isn't it true that all of us showed up here this morning twisted up or weighed down in some way or another? Some of us come crushed by grief, or addiction, or physical pain, or disease, or fear, or resentment – some weight that we can't seem to get out from under. Others of us – maybe all of us to some extent – come twisted up and weighed down by the religion we have bought into that has deceived us into thinking that we have to live up to some certain standard if God is going to notice us. This is church, for God's sake, on Sunday morning! Deal with your mess on Monday. Today is a day for putting on our Sunday best! That's such a heavy a weight, one from which we can never escape on our own.

I can't begin to tell you how many people I have sat with over the years who have revealed, often through tears, the twistedness of their lives. Sadly, far too many of these same people end up full of shame because, as they tell me, they look around church on Sunday mornings and everybody else looks so put together. I don't belong here. My mess doesn't belong here. So many of us carry around the burden of this crippled woman and the burden of this self-righteous synagogue leader all mixed up together. And I wonder how in the world the gospel can ever break through. Maybe it begins when we all recognize we are in the same boat, crippled woman and synagogue leader both crushed by burdens from which they can't escape.

Who here has somebody in you family – might be yourself – who is suffering from depression? Who here has somebody in your family – might be yourself – who is struggling with addiction? Who here has somebody in your family – might be yourself – who hides some shameful sin behind an immaculate disguise? Who here has somebody in your family – might be yourself – who too easily judges the shortcomings in other people which exist in themselves?

Who here has pain in your life? Who here sometimes feels more doubt than faith? Who here carries around things inside which you hope nobody ever sees? Who here has a tendency of thinking about yourself more than you think of others? Who here has sadness inside that other people can't see? Who here sometimes feels desperately alone? Who here is at times afraid of what is to come in life?

Look around you. Do you see my point? This is not a place where we should be pretending. Church on Sunday mornings, in fact, is the last place in the world where we should be pretending! I know we are trying our best to get God to notice us; religion has sunk its claws in us all! So brothers and sisters, hear the gospel when I proclaim it to you: God noticed you a long time ago, way before you noticed him. And he not only notices you but sees in you everything you hope nobody ever sees. Everything! There is no mask he cannot see behind.

If you're willing, close your eyes for a moment. I want you to imagine something. Imagine that Jesus is here this morning, which I actually believe is true. Imagine that Jesus is here and imagine that he notices you. Truth is, he notices everything about you. You may not even really know who he is, but he still notices you. Now imagine he speaks to you. He calls you to come over to him. And so you go to him. I hope you go to him. As you stand before him he speaks these words to you, “You are set free. You are set free from that thing which has weighed on you for so long.” Do you know

<sup>10</sup> See this phrase repeated over and over in Matthew 5-7.

<sup>11</sup> See Matthew 22:34-40

what he's referring to? What crooked part of you is he talking about? What heavy weight does he have in mind? Let him point it out to you. It is from that thing that he has now declared you are free. And I know you will protest; there are all sorts of reasons why this can't be true, why you can't be free. But he insists. This is what Jesus says to you. And as he lays his hands on you – I want you to imagine it – as he touches even the most twisted parts of you, can you believe that he does so to make every crooked thing in you straight again?

You can open your eyes again. Do you want to know what might be the greatest gift we can give to one another in the church? We can stop pretending with one another and stop expecting one another to pretend. Sunday morning, along with whenever we gather together, ought to be a time for setting people free rather than heaping up more burdens on each other. Don't you agree? Don't you wish that was what the church was like?

Let me tell you one simple thing we can all do to make this happen. When you are with your church, whether it's here on Sunday morning or at another time or place, and there is something that is weighing you down in life, even if it's a source of shame, find some people here you trust and let them know about it. And then, whenever one of us hears a brother or sister confess to us some part of life that has become for them twisted and heavy, we should immediately do the following every time. First, listen carefully to what is being said, not with judgment but with as much compassion as God can grant you. And then after you have listened, pray. Right then and there pray. Grab somebody else nearby if that's appropriate and if you have the permission of the one who has just shared to do so, and then lay a hand on that person, and pray. Pray boldly to the one who has noticed a long time ago what you just noticed. Pray that he would come and unbind what evil has caused to be bound. Don't worry about the words you use. Make your prayer simple because God will not be impressed with your grammar or religious jargon. Don't make a scene. Just pray with whatever words God gives you and then expect for God to show up.

Can you imagine what that woman outside the synagogue experienced when Jesus laid his hands on her that day? Did you know that we, the church, are now Christ's body here on earth, his hands and his feet, and that when we pray and lay hands on one another, we may in fact also experience the same freedom that that woman experienced?

Would you promise with me to do this from now on? Resist the temptation to keep your burdens to yourself. They are too heavy for you carry alone. Find others

here you can trust to share those burdens. And whenever somebody here shares with you a burden, don't respond by telling them that you will pray for them later. Pray for them later certainly, but first pray for them right then and there. I would love to look around after worship on a Sunday morning – *every Sunday morning* – both in here in the sanctuary and out at coffee hour where too often the deep hurts of us all go unnoticed, and I would love to see the body of Christ noticing one another and praying for one another and helping one another, by God's grace, to be set free.

You are no donkey. Neither is the person sitting next to you. We are all so much more in the eyes of God. You are one who is noticed by Christ, and not only noticed but loved and set free. Whenever we are together may we love one another in ways that help us each to stand up straight in Christ and give our praise – all our praise! – to the one who is at work doing these things in our midst and beyond.

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 13:10-17 again. What stands out first to you from this story?
2. From what we can tell here, Jesus heals this woman before she even asks to be healed. What can we learn from this?
3. The leader of the synagogue is furious after he watches Jesus heal this woman. Why? What's going on here?
4. What has to happen to the heart of a person, even a religious person, so that they end up caring more about a donkey than a fellow human being? Could this ever happen to your heart?
5. Can you think of instances where you have experienced or witnessed tensions between showing compassion for people on the one hand, and keeping religious rules on the other hand? Which won out?
6. As soon as Jesus put his hands on this woman she straightened up and was healed. If Jesus put his hands on you today, what would you first want him to 'straighten up' in your life? Do you believe this is possible?

7. What might we do at Faith on our sabbath days to make sure that everybody who comes here knows that this is a place of healing and grace? Be specific and concrete.
8. What is one way that God is using this story and this message to change the way you think and/or the way you live?

**Table to Table Question**

***A question for kids and adults to answer together***

Does God ever want us to break the rules if breaking the rules means we might help somebody? Can you think of an example?