

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 13:10-17

Thomas E. Boomershine, PhD

The story of the woman who was bent over is both a story of confrontation about Sabbath laws and a story of liberation. The context of this story in Luke is Jesus' journey up to Jerusalem. He stops in a synagogue on his way through Samaria. The focus of virtually that entire journey is Jesus' various teachings along the way.

There are two parts to the story. The first two episodes where the woman is healed constitute part one. The first episode is about the woman and her condition. The second is about Jesus' response to her. He called her over and told her she was set free, and laid his hands on her. The result was that she immediately stood up straight and began praising God.

All this happens in the synagogue where Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath which leads to the second part of the story: controversy with others in the synagogue who were indignant about the healing. The indignation of the leader of the synagogue is the subject of the third episode. The fourth episode is Jesus' response to him which is addressed not just to him but also to all those in the synagogue.

The final episode is the response of the crowd. His opponents were put to shame and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.

So if you think of the structure, it's an easy story to learn:

1. The woman
2. Jesus
3. The leader of the synagogue
4. Jesus' response to him
5. The people's response to Jesus teaching and healing

It is important to identify the Jewish provenance of this story. This is an argument about Sabbath law, about a daughter of Abraham, and the leader of the synagogue. The argument that Jesus makes is a classic rabbinic argument that moves from the light to the grave; that, is from a matter of minor importance to something of major importance. His argument is, "You all take your ox or your donkey and untie and lead it away to give it water, a little thing. The big thing is this woman who has been down for eighteen years. Shouldn't she also be given the privilege of being untied from her bondage on the Sabbath day?" The comparison is: if it's true for the minor thing—your ox or your donkey— that it's okay to work on the Sabbath, then isn't it also okay to make an exception in relation to a major thing, namely, this woman's life? This is a classic rabbinic argument.

Everything in this story is set in the context of Judaism in the late first century. The audience is addressed as members of the synagogue. Here are a couple of pointers about the dynamics of this story and telling it.

The description of the woman is very poignant and so to describe her being bent over, maybe even to demonstrate that she couldn't stand up straight and to tell that in a way that conveys the agony of her condition and being unable to stand up straight. Jesus' response is one of compassion and the woman's healing is a moment of great joy: "She stood up straight and began praising God." So do that and do it big for an experience of the woman's being set free.

The leader of the synagogue is indignant. The level of indignation that is present in relation to violations of Sabbath law is very high in many observant Jewish communities. It is a cornerstone of identity and is an issue that people were willing to go the wall for. I will never forget when we were in Jerusalem, we pulled up in our bus at just after sundown to a hotel that was right on the edge of an Orthodox Jewish district. The bus was immediately surrounded by men who were furious and barged into the hotel, confronted the bus driver. They said, "If you ever come back here again, we will turn your bus over and burn it." So don't hesitate to express a high degree of rage in relation to what Jesus has done.

The leader's anger is not addressed to Jesus directly, but to the crowd. But, of course, it's addressed indirectly at Jesus. Jesus then also speaks to the crowd as a way of addressing the leader. His response is probably not as angry as the synagogue leader's, but this is a real fight. Jesus clearly assumes that the congregation initially agrees with the leader and so he addresses them about their hypocrisy in relation to being angry about the healing, when they take their ox or donkey and lead it to water on the Sabbath. Jesus clearly assumed that every man in the congregation followed this practice.

It is important to recognize is that this is a Jewish story being told by Luke about Jews and I think predominantly to Jews but also to Gentiles who were Jewish in their identity. In order to participate in this story, it is essential that you address the audience in your congregation as Jews who are members of the synagogue.

Sabbath was a cornerstone of Jewish identity. It was what made Jews different from Gentiles because Gentiles did not observe the Sabbath. The observation of Sabbath law was especially important to the Pharisees. Not all Jews cared; many of them were like secular Jews now as well as secular Christians who don't care about the Sabbath. But the Pharisees did, as did all Jews who were concerned about doing what was right and observing religious laws. They were like Christians who go to church every Sunday and who pay attention to doing what is right.

Jesus was also concerned. He is involved in debate with the Pharisees about the weightier matters of the law because he does care. Jesus at several points in the story expresses that

he has authority over the Sabbath. Over and over again he gets involved in controversies around what is more important about Sabbath law observance. This is rabbinic debate about what characterizes the things that are most important to observe about Sabbath. Jesus does not at any point say that the Sabbath should not be observed. His arguments are about what is most important to happen on the Sabbath day, that healing and caring for the sick are of sufficient importance that they are worth doing on the Sabbath day.

In the background of this story is the argument about the character of the kingdom of God. Actions such as a woman being set free from an evil spirit gives specificity to the proclamation of the coming of the kingdom. Her being able to stand up straight, to have dignity again, and to be set free from her affliction is a sign of the presence of the government of God and of the spirit of this new age.

There are a couple small matters that I want to mention. The first is that there is a verbal thread in the episode of Jesus' response that is not rightly translated and that I would suggest that you change. Jesus' response is "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath **untie** his ox or his donkey and lead it away?" The next sentence about the woman, the word that is translated in the NRSV as "set free" is the same word as **untie** and Luke is clearly here making a connection between this. So "Don't each of you **untie** his ox or his donkey... then ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be **untied** from this bondage on the Sabbath day." You might want to add "released" to the sentence: "untied and released." The verbal connection between these two is made very explicit by Jesus: "You guys untie your ox or your donkey. I am untying and releasing this woman who has been bound for eighteen years and that's appropriate on the Sabbath." The verbal thread helps make the connection.

The other detail is that the entire congregation rejoiced at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing. The word that is used there, *indoxa* is also used in Exodus 34:10. I suggest you look it up and read that story. It is about Moses in the immediate aftermath of receiving the tablets a second time. The word is used to describe all the wonderful things that God will do for the people of Israel. It sets the rejoicing at the wonderful things that Jesus was doing in the context of the miracles and signs that God did for the people of Israel in the past. So it will simply help make that more specific and concrete.

This is a story that combines a miracle of healing with a controversy. In that sense it is like the healing of the paralytic in Mark. The move from the miracle and subsequent celebration to conflict is a story development that makes his story very interesting. Furthermore, it ends with an even greater degree of joy on the part of the entire crowd who were rejoicing at the things Jesus was doing. So it's a great story of hope.