

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16, Year C
August 24, 2025
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights
Karen Carter

I come to you today with a heavy heart. Within the last bit of time tragedy has struck the young people in our Shaker Hts. community multiple times. Many of you know of the shooting at the Main Library this past year.

This time of year we often experience joy and anticipation as a new school year and a new program season begins.

But many are also carrying the weight of grief or worry or fear.

In truth, I had planned a very different sermon originally. Written out pages and pages of notes and ideas. But when it came time to write that sermon, the weight of the tragedies in Shaker sat heavy on me. It hits close to me, as someone who cares for and loves youth in the Shaker community. In fact, I almost didn't write anything at all. Shaken so much by the loss, I feared I couldn't write.

Thankfully, Jesus met me, as I was bent over under the weight of sadness, through the caring guidance of Gabriel and a long walk in God's beautiful creation.

I found that scripture, even very brief passages like our gospel today, contains multitudes and when read with the presence of the Holy Spirit, can give us just what we need.

In today's Gospel we find Jesus teaching in a synagogue, this is a common place for Jesus at this point in his ministry. We are not told what he is teaching or even much about the synagogue. These details do not seem to be important to the main point of why this story was passed on.

As Jesus is teaching, a woman comes in who is bent over by an ailment and has been that way for eighteen years. In some translations ailment is replaced with arthritis and she is described as being "so twisted and bent over with arthritis that she couldn't even look up." For eighteen years she was bent over from an ailment unable to see anything but the ground beneath her feet. Her ailment, whatever it was, in that culture and time was considered to be an affliction from Satan. Indeed, even Jesus describes it as such when he describes her as being "bound by Satan for eighteen long years."

Thus, having whatever her ailment was, it caused her to be marginalized from the community, she would have been treated as insignificant. Because her ailment was viewed as an affliction from Satan, she was made an outcast, unimportant to the religious leaders and the community. She was kept from living into the fullness of who God made her to be by a community that viewed her as too small or unimportant. Oppressed under the weight of how her community viewed her condition in that time and place she is kept from belonging.

But, as Jesus so often does, he disrupts this cultural standard. He interrupts his teaching and goes to the woman. He drops what he is doing to tend to this bent over woman in need who is viewed as unimportant by her community. He says "Woman, you are set free from your ailment!"

Freeing her from her condition didn't just heal her body, it freed her from the oppression she was under. It freed her from being viewed as insignificant, from being ignored, and it opened up the way for her to live into the fullness of the life God called her to.

Imagine what this must have felt like for her. For eighteen years she was ignored, viewed by the religious leaders as not important, likely ignored by many. And then one day Jesus interrupts what he is doing to go directly to her. She didn't even ask. Perhaps resigned to her fate. He goes to her and heals her. She no longer will be treated as unimportant. No longer forced to the margins. He has shown her she is loved by God. Who she is, is important to God.

But unfortunately, the synagogue leaders are so caught up in maintaining the status quo, maintaining the way things are and the religious rules and traditions, that they completely miss the incredible, life-giving moment in front of them. They are even indignant about it.

Jesus doesn't mince words, calling the synagogue leaders hypocrites, or in some translations, frauds. Pointing out to them that they are willing to take care of their donkeys on the sabbath so why shouldn't this woman, a daughter of Abraham, be freed from what is keeping her from living a full life.

Jesus's lesson is that God cares more about people's healing and their ability to live into the fullness of who God made them to be, than any cultural norms, religious expectations or traditions. And we should too.

This is one of at least five stories in the Gospels where Jesus drives home this same message - God loves his people, especially those who are marginalized, more than anything else. More than religious laws or our forms of worship; more than our traditions. God's desire is for all people to know they are beloved. Jesus is teaching us that our priority should be the healing and freeing of those on the margins, those being treated as insignificant, and walking with them into the fullness of life and belonging.

We are inheritors of this gift of healing. God wants us to be healed from anything that keeps us from living into our gifts and belonging, as the beautiful individuals God created each of us to be.

We are also called into this work of bringing healing and freedom to those who, like this woman, are bent over under a weight that keeps them from living into the fullness of life.

This healing work requires us to prioritize those being marginalized over anything else. It requires us to look both inwardly at our community here at St. Paul's and outwardly at those being marginalized in our country today.

As we begin a new school year, our young people embark on many exciting opportunities. School can be a place of learning, fun and friendship. Our young people will also face challenges and many stressors. Some carry burdens we do not know about, from hidden disabilities and mental and physical illnesses to silent stress and fear. There is much going on in our country that directly impacts our young people, especially our young people in the LGBTQIA+ and immigrant communities.

To our young people, know that just like the young woman in our story, God loves you. God cares that you live into the fullness of life as the beloved person she created you to be. Nothing matters more

to God than you. If you find yourself bent over under a weight you worry you can not bear or stress that feels heavy. God will meet you in that place and remind you, you are beloved. And we, here at St. Paul's, will wrap our care around you and be there for you. I know Lauren won't hesitate for even a second to love you and invite you in.

Adults, let us not forget that we can be Jesus to our young people. Our kids need us to see when they are struggling. Especially without them having to ask. We can be Christ's loving and healing hands to them. Let us prioritize all our young people knowing they belong in our community.

They also need to see how we, as adults and as a Christ-following community, are prioritizing carrying on Jesus's ministry of healing and freedom from marginalization and oppression.

We are called into this beautiful ministry, invited to be Jesus's healing hands and feet, freeing those being targeted and being treated as insignificant. We, at St. Paul's, can continue to create a space of healing and belonging for all and especially for those who are marginalized. We can carry this work of healing into the world, working for the healing and freedom of those being targeted today, especially those in our LGBTQIA+ and immigrant communities, so that all may live into the fullness of life that God desires for them.