

# Sermons at Christ Church

## *Reaching Out in Faith*

*Pentecost 11*  
*Rev. Emmanuel Mercer*

“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Jesus said to the woman who had been suffering for 18 years. This woman may have seen countless doctors, but the ailment had manifestly grown to the point where it was visible for all to see. She is full of anxiety and worry-why me? She would ask herself every morning. Situations like this push us to be inward looking, making us feel that we are worth less than what we were made for. It is like fighting a battle and not knowing who your adversaries are.

But of the many things that she couldn't do, one of the things that she could do was to be in the synagogue- that was the place of refreshment, the place of restoration, the one place where she could hear the story of salvation and renew her faith in the God who heals. That was the one place where she could hear the stories of resistance.

This woman didn't go out to seek Jesus. She probably didn't know about Jesus. Her mission was to worship and to offer a prayer to the God of her life. But while in the synagogue, Jesus saw her and was moved by compassion. He knew that that wasn't how this woman was to live her life.

And for the sake of that knowledge, let me restore you to the person you were created to be. For the sake of that knowledge, let me heal you of your ailment. You were created to live life to its fullest and our very being and existence must sing of God's glory.

Jesus connected with her, affirmed the essence of her being by his touch, laid his hand upon her and made her whole. That ailment for which she had been struggling for eighteen years was gone. In gratitude, she praises the God in whose honor she went to the synagogue to worship.

If you have not been in a similar situation like the woman, if you have not been left totally helpless. If your world has never been turned upside down, you will not understand this woman's praise. If you have always been at the top and never been at the bottom, you may not understand this woman's praise. If life has always been kind to you because everything has been handed to you on a silver platter, you will not understand this woman's praise.

If you have never been set free from that which has taken you captive, be it addiction, anxiety, depression, racism, bigotry-those things that cripple us, you will not understand this woman's praise. But if you have ever been at the bottom. If you have ever felt shackled by the terrors of life. If you have ever felt captive by an illness or disease or condition, you know what it means to sing when you have been set free from that which diminishes you and takes away your dignity and pride.

I once heard a story about a spouse who couldn't contain his joy when he heard that the wife was cancer free. His question was, how do I do the happy dance? Being free of her ailment meant that he could rejoice with her and do the happy dance. Being free of anything that reduces our humanity means that we can do the happy dance-and this woman did the happy dance.

But there's a problem with her healing. Her happy dance didn't last that long. She was healed on the Sabbath. And the leader of the synagogue who couldn't join in the happy dance, raised an objection. You would think that everybody would be happy to see the daughter of Abraham freed from her bondage. But not so fast.

Two things about this story. First, there are those who are willing to see others suffer needlessly. Second, we are meant to say no mas, no more suffering. And always resist the attempt to make others suffer.

If Jesus looked at the woman and concluded that that wasn't how she was meant to fully live her life, why do we have to normalize or believe that the systems that diminishes us and others, and which we have had to unwillingly carry along should dictate how we live our lives? That system is an ailment which is a crippling spirit and needs the sort of healing that is only possible through resistance.

Remember that keeping the Sabbath wasn't the problem, but its application was the problem. That is why Jesus wonders, how come you untie your animals and take them for a drink on the sabbath, but have an issue with a daughter of Abraham being healed on the sabbath? If it is cruel to keep your animals thirsty on the sabbath, isn't it also cruel to see a human being suffer on the sabbath?

The question is, who is of more value, your animals or this woman? In so far as any child of Abraham is of more value than any animal, the Sabbath then should be about resistance.

Resistance to the systems that prefer to see others in perpetual servitude. Resistance to the systems that are indifferent to people carrying debilitating ailments that has reduced them into mere shadows of their true worth. Resistance to those who are not ready to join in the happy dance of immigrants, refugees, African Americans, women, children, LGBTQ brothers and sisters, the poor, hungry, sick and all those at the margins of our society. It appears that any progress is an affront to this system.

The sabbath is about resistance to the systems that aren't ready to accept the truth about anything that stands in contrast to what they tell us. To tell the truth to this system is to lose your livelihood. Listen to the ancient Plato, "We live in a time when lies are taught as truth and anyone who dares to speak reality is insane."

The sabbath is about resistance to the systems that have little respect, little compassion, little humility, little grace but pretend to be filled with the fullness of God-when in fact, it is not. Jesus refers the purveyors of this system as hypocrites.

There's a story of a great scholar and champion of logic, philosophy and ethics who traveled throughout India challenging scholars to debate. He was carried in a decorated palanquin by four strong men who carried him from town to town. There's no question that this great scholar cannot answer. One day, when he arrived at a town, a five-year-old kid ran up to him and said 'Sir, I have a question for you.' He looked down from his palanquin and said to the boy, "I am the champion scholar of the world, you are just a child, get away from me.' The little boy responded, "If you're enlightened, then why are you making so much fuss about my body? I am not my body.'

The scholar then asked him, “What is your question?” The little boy picked up a handful of sand and held it up to the scholar and said, “Tell me sir, how many grains of sand are in my hand?” The scholar was left speechless because he had never been asked a question like that. The little boy then said ‘Sir, a person who has knowledge, real knowledge, such a person is like a tree with good fruits. If a tree has a lot of good fruits, the tree bows down. If a tree has no fruit, it doesn’t bow down to anyone.’ If you do not have respect for others, if you are not humble before the greatness of God, then I consider your knowledge to be as worthless as this hand full of sand.’ And then threw the sand away.

Much as I believe in the law that orders our society, I also believe that any law that cripples you in doing what is right, that hinders your desire to be compassionate is troublesome. In his Letter from Birmingham jail, Dr. King wrote this “One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”

For this reason, I believe that the sabbath is about resisting the unequal application of the law. It is about resisting a social life that feeds coercion, fear, discrimination and bigotry. The Sabbath is about resisting any attempt to adulterate compassion for the sake of upholding a law. The Sabbath is not entirely about inaction it is about an act of resisting any attempt at diluting human dignity.

I heard about this man that died and went to heave. St. Peter escorted him down this long hallway filled with thousands of clocks on the wall. The hands on the clock were moving at different speeds. Peter explained that every person has a clock. When they sin, the clock ticks. One clock was barely moving-that was Billy Graham’s clock. Another clock was at standstill-that’s Mother Teresa’s clock. The man said curiously, ‘Can I see my clock?’ Peter said, “Yeah. We keep yours in the office and use it as a fan.”

What inspires me about this story is that the woman didn’t see her condition as an excuse to not honor God. She kept going to the synagogue on the sabbath-that was also her form of resistance too because no ailment could define her. And there in the synagogue, she found her liberation.

I once read a quote by Ronald Knox , a Catholic priest and theologian “Almost all of Jesus’ commands have been dishonored. But there’s one which we have consistently honored-which is the Eucharist. Do this in remembrance of me. Despite all our sins, we still honor that command because of the insatiable value in it.”

Just as much as the woman was in the synagogue to keep faith with God, so are we here, in spite of any condition or ailment, to keep faith with God.

The insatiable value we find in the eucharist is what nurtures and sustains our resistance to systems that diminish us and render us less worthy of who we are. But so long as we are here, we are glued to each other and to the path of resistance that leads to human transformation and liberty. Welcome home. **Amen.**