

Urgency

Proper 16, Year C, RCL, Track 2. Isaiah 58:9b-14. Psalm 103:1-8. Hebrews 12:18-29. Luke 13:10-17. The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. August 21, 2016. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The Sabbath, the last day of the week (which we call Saturday), is a day dedicated to God in the Jewish religious system. In that system, it is a day on which no work ought to be done. Only worship, study of holy matters, and Godly conversation are appropriate. But there are some exceptions, mostly involving acts of mercy and bottom-line physical necessity. The interpretation of all this has varied through the centuries, but at the time of Jesus the rules were pretty well established and well known. That is the background for the incident described in today's reading from Luke's gospel (Luke 13:10-17).

You could do the work required to provide water for your ox or your donkey on the Sabbath because watering livestock cannot be put off; animals will die if they are not given water.

It is an act of mercy as well as an act of urgent necessity to water livestock. Therefore it is permitted on the Sabbath. In his argument with the president of the synagogue, Jesus is saying that his healing of the crippled woman counts the same way. The president of the synagogue disagrees. By *his* analysis, the healing is certainly an act of mercy but it is

not urgent. It counts as ordinary doctoring work. Therefore it could (and should) have been done some other time than on the day dedicated to “God stuff.”

But for Jesus, all his miracles, all the works and words of his ministry, are urgent. His message is always framed in urgency. This woman has been bound for eighteen years. How can cutting loose the knot of her disability not be urgent? And what better day than the Sabbath, the day dedicated to God’s honor and glory, to give a concrete demonstration of God’s love, God’s saving purpose, God’s power to renew and change life?

Jesus is urgent in his speech and actions because he knows he doesn’t have long and neither does the established Jewish social, political and religious system in the promised land *if* it does not accept renewal under God. He, of course, is the agent of this renewal, and people can accept his message or not. If most of them do not accept it the Jerusalem Temple and all it stands for will fall, but even if that happens, the message of renewal will take root and grow.

And that’s what happened. The Temple is gone, but the Church is here. Judaism is still here, too, but it has lost its special geographic center, the Temple in Jerusalem, which was destroyed a few decades after Jesus’ execution. That lost geographic center, a source of grief in Judaism for two thousand years, is a big part of what the re-establishment of the state of Israel has been about. But that whole project is complicated by the fact that Jesus’ renewal movement has

had powerful results beyond the traditional limits of Jewish faith and practice.

So it is a lovely thing that a woman who had suffered deformity for eighteen years has been healed. But as always the miracle has a wider point to make, a meaning whose resonance expands and extends beyond the occasion on which the miracle occurs. And that wider point is this: all social, political and economic systems are corrupt, in one way or another and to one degree or another. Alas, insofar as there are social, political and economic aspects to religious systems (and there always are), they too suffer from corruption. That includes the Church. Therefore, the renewing Spirit of God always has plenty of action to call God's friends to get involved in. We call it ministry: the work in the world (and in the Church) that evokes and bears witness to the will of God for holiness of life. This work continues the work of Jesus; it heals and helps actual people, one by one, but it also affects corrupt social, political and economic systems, pressing them to move in a better direction. The action of God's Spirit through the ministry of God's friends makes life better overall, and it looks forward to the completion of this work at the return of Jesus Christ.

The *urgency* of this is found in what we are called to focus on *right now*. Someone is hurting *right now*. People are wringing their hands or throwing them up in despair over what do about suffering and injustice *right now*. And, though we do not know precisely what the conditions are that God has in mind for the return of his Son to this

troubled world, we do know it is important for us to persevere in doing good. Jesus himself remarked, referring to his return, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8)

Faith in action is ministry. Ministry is, in all its forms, the calling of every Christian to do what he or she can for the healing and renewal of creation. William Wilberforce and many other Christians worked to end slavery in the European cultural area. Many Christians have worked for centuries to feed the hungry and relieve misery of all kinds. It seems unending. But it is important not to lose heart. It is as important as if the healing of one crippled woman could, by itself, bring on the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

❖ This sermon is a slightly revised version of the one preached in the Shared Ministry on August 25, 2013.