



WOMEN'S DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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(See the 2011 Women's Day worship unit for a host of great ideas to make your Women's Day activities meaningful and memorable.)

Lection – Luke 13:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 10) Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. (v. 11) 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. (v. 12) When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' (v. 13) When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (v. 14) 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.' (v. 15) 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? (v. 16) 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?’ (v. 17) 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.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Tammy Kernodle wrote in the 2009 cultural resource unit for Women’s Day:

Noting the historic and monumental work of women within the Baptist denomination, in 1908, Nannie Helen Burroughs, then head of the Women’s Convention of the National Baptist Convention (NBC), introduced the concept of a National Women’s Day during the organization’s annual convention. The day would be the one instance in black church life where the contributions of women would be celebrated and commemorated by the black church. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, in her book Righteous Discontent, says that the day was originally sanctioned to be celebrated on the last Sunday in July and was “conceived as an expression of sisterhood and a means of financial support for the Women’s Caucus.”¹ Over the years, the celebration of Women’s Day spread to other denominations, religious societies, and white churches.

Burroughs had intended that funds raised during Women’s Day would be used to support the causes of women. Unfortunately, this has rarely happened.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 13:10-17

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

The longer I live the more I am convinced that things are really bad for African American women in America, especially in the black church. Yes, there are now more women clergy than ever, but they are still not called to pastor churches that can actually pay a decent salary. If they do well in denominational jobs they are still not promoted to lead denominations. In 2011, the two largest historic African American Christian denominations—The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and the National Baptist U.S.A. Inc.—do not have any women in positions of authority. Women are still only allowed to lead the mission groups and the women’s groups and to work under men in the Christian education departments of these denominations. The A.M.E. denomination (another historically black denomination) now has three female bishops. But one will have to search far and wide for more than three females that bishops have placed at leading large churches in the last 30 years. The CMEs are worst. They only elected their first female bishop (Teresa Snorton) in 2010, and out of the ten departments that the denomination has, only one, the Women’s Department, is headed by a woman.

Clearly the black church is more interested in meeting, managing, and continuing church traditions than it is in setting captives free and eliminating oppression if women are the subject at hand. If the black church is going to continue holding Women’s Day programs and celebrations, it is high time that the church begin treating women in a way that is worth celebrating. Instead of continuing practices that cripple the forward movement of women, it’s high time that churches

step up and either become healers of women or at least get out of the way and stop blocking the progress of those who can provide uplift.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

This well-known text has a cast of five: Jesus, a woman who was cured after being crippled for 18 years, the leader of the Synagogue (an opponent of Jesus), other opponents of Jesus, and those who rejoiced when the woman was healed. Amazingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, this cast of characters still pervades the lives of African American women and the African American church. Modernly, we might typecast them as: Jesus, resurrected and still working on behalf of those who need healing; women who were crippled and have been cured; religious leaders who place traditions before the needs of women; other enemies of the work of Christ, and those who rejoice when someone is healed.

In this text Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He stops and visits an unnamed synagogue in an unnamed village. We know that it was his custom to go to synagogues and to teach in synagogues (Luke 4:16; Matthew 4:23). However, on this occasion, he does more than just visit the synagogue to teach. He loosens a woman (whom he calls a “daughter of Abraham”); the woman had been in physical captivity for 18 years; a spirit had her bound. Those who find fault with the healing are the type of enemies that Jesus will later face as destiny takes him to Jerusalem to do battle with another type of evil.

Stephanie Buckhannon Crowder, in True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary, writes of this passage:

Again reinterpreting the meaning of the Sabbath as a time “to set the captive free and let the oppressed go free,” Luke narrates the Sabbath healing of a woman bent over for eighteen years. This is the second of a three-part Sabbath healing series (Luke 6:6-11–14:1-6). Luke employs agricultural language, untying an “ox or donkey” (v. 15), not only to address the negative mind-set toward women but also to show the extent of the woman’s burden and thus her need for deliverance. Jesus restores her humanity by calling her to him and by touching her, thereby symbolically drawing an “untouchable” once again into community. He restores her racial and ethnic identity by referring to her as a daughter of Abraham.²

For Jesus, the healing of this woman takes precedence over a religious obligation, even the Sabbath. Jesus reinterprets the Sabbath indeed. It is not a period in the week where ceremonies are more important than those in need of help, especially those viewed as untouchables and those on the margins of society, like this woman crippled by a spirit. He also reinterprets the posture of the synagogue. Of all places, the synagogue should have been a healing and helpful place, not the place where a woman crippled for 18 years is basically told, “Wait longer for your healing.” She had to face their crippling attitudes on top of dealing with her crippling condition.

The leader of the synagogue does not directly address Jesus, but rather speaks to the crowd repeatedly as if to inflame them against Jesus and gain an Amen for his stance on the matter. Can’t you hear him say: “You all saw it; he healed on the Sabbath. That’s not right. You all

know it's not right. Am I right about it?" In his response to the leader (and anyone who might side with the synagogue head), Jesus uses something of little import (releasing an ox or a donkey to let it get water) then speaks of an important release (a woman suffering from an 18-year infirmity). Likely the leader and his supporters didn't see release of an ox or donkey as work but rather a necessity, in that it allowed them to care for something that contributed to their livelihood. Unfortunately, too often, crippled women are made secondary to the things that allow men in power to take care of what they really value—power, money, and the status quo.

But, technically, actually moving an animal to let it get water was working on the Sabbath. What Jesus did, in contrast, by healing the woman, took less effort than they expended releasing their animals. After all, he was a miracle worker. This was what he did. He actually did less work on the Sabbath than they did. Also, although they did not know it, Jesus was the authority over the Sabbath. But his concern is not with their amount of work on the Sabbath, but rather with their misplaced priorities and their lack of concern for this daughter of Abraham. He calls them "hypocrites" because they could reason a way for taking care of animals on the Sabbath but could not wrap their minds around Jesus healing a woman on the Sabbath. In other words, they had made themselves jury and judge over how to apply Sabbath rules.

Unlike those who this woman saw during the Sabbath and after, who were busy situationally applying Sabbath rules, Jesus sees her and calls her over. This woman receives more attention from a stranger than she does from the members of her synagogue. He calls her a daughter of Abraham; these are the people to whom Jesus said he was sent (Matthew 15:24). She is a member of a group that is important to God and to Jesus not just because she is a daughter of Abraham, but because she is a daughter of God. Not only does he see her, but he also calls to her and heals her. And of course after being cured from 18 years of debilitation, misery, and hell she stands up and immediately begins praising God. How could she not!

After hearing the comparison between their working on the Sabbath and the work that he did on the Sabbath, his opponents were put to shame and the crowd rejoiced at what was done. At least the crowd was not so place and occasion conscious that they couldn't celebrate with the sister. The text doesn't say they spoke up for her against the synagogue, but at least they knew when to celebrate. There are those who will not stand up against the forces that constrain women; I wish to God they could at least celebrate the victories of women who are released from the clutches of constriction. Thank goodness Jesus is still loosening women from spirits that are crippling. The question is which group is the black church in when these women show up now. Is the church guarding tradition, standing on the sideline, or acting as the hands and feet of Jesus so that the healing that is present is heaven comes on earth as it is in heaven?

Celebration

Thank God for a Savior who sees women and wants them unbound and healed. Thank God for all the women who are doing what Jesus would do: releasing women and men, healing them and seeing them as people made in the image of God. Thank God for all of the women who are helping hold it all down, hold it together, and who keep holding on. They've escaped from one binding situation after another and have never been wiped out by anything that came to cripple

them. Husky, “stout of fist,” determined, cannot be beaten back or kept down forever women—we celebrate these women on Women’s Day.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: The murmuring of the people in the synagogue, the once-crippled woman praising God, the leader of the synagogue speaking indignantly to Jesus, Jesus’ words putting the leader to shame, the woman praising God, the crowd rejoicing;

Sights: A woman bent over and unable to stand up straight, the woman being healed and standing up straight, the healed woman praising God; and

Smells: The aromas from the synagogue and the odors that came from the crowd.

III. Recommendations for This Year’s Women’s Day Celebration

This year, instead of just holding a program, raising money, and parading women in white or pastel, use this period to engage your entire church in looking at the modern ways that the church is crippling women. Possible questions:

- How does your church treat women clergy?
- Does your church support denominations that treat women as second-class citizens? If so, is the church’s participation in these denominations more important than the just treatment of women?
- How does your church treat women relative to positions of authority in your church?
- How does your church treat poor women? How does your church treat unwed mothers? How does your church treat disabled women? (You can develop a list to suit the circumstances of your church. You may have to ask the opinions of women who are in some of the groups about which you have questions in order to get honest answers.)

Then, develop solutions to help your church become a healing place for women.

Notes

1. Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993. p. 161.

2. Buckhannon Crowder, Stephanie. “Luke.” True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary. Ed. Brian Blount. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2007. p. 172.