***“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….Healing” (but how long does it take?)***

***Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17***

***August 21, 2022***

***Trumbull Congregational Church, Trumbull, CT***

***Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, guest preacher***

Today is the second of four messages on the theme *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….”* While each messages “stands alone,” there are some connections between the four, so I have left copies of last week’s message in the rear of the church.

Today’s message is *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is…Healing” (but how long does it take?)* As noted last week, summer can be a time of easy living that is restorative as rhythms slow down, vacations offer a change of pace, and warmer weather both beckons us outside and forces us, by the very discomfort of heat, to go easy.

All of this can be healing. Life can be hard. The relentless pressure to produce and achieve is woven into American culture and influenced by the theology of the earliest New England colonists. Being convinced they were “chosen” by God to create a New Israel on these shores, and believing they were predestined for accomplishing this lofty vision, the early colonists looked for confirmation of their status as God’s elect. One understanding of such election, even today, is prosperity. If one has acquired wealth, one must be blessed of God, right? Therefore, if one is uncertain about one’s ultimate destiny before God, work hard and the resulting success will certainly remove any doubt, at least in the eyes of others if not in one’s heart of hearts. And so was born the Protestant work ethic.

But as Billy Joel sang so eloquently years ago:

Sergeant O'Leary is walkin' the beat, At night he becomes a bartender  
He works at Mister Cacciatore's down on Sullivan Street  
Across from the medical center  
He's tradin' in his Chevy for a Cadillac, You oughta know by now  
And if he can't drive with a broken back at least he can polish the fenders

It seems such a waste of time, If that's what it's all about  
Mama if that's movin' up, Then I'm movin' out.

So our hard work can be derailed: by stress, by destroyed relationships, or even by a sudden reversal of our health.

Which brings us to today’s Gospel. Anyone who has lost their health, whether by a broken back or any other injury or malady, will empathize with the woman in today’s Gospel reading. Faith’s imagination can take us there, in the synagogue, where Jesus is teaching. As would have been the custom of the time, Jesus was seated while teaching when a woman appears, a woman who has suffered for eighteen years, bent over, unable to stand up straight. Now, mark me: the appearance of this woman was not in the lesson plan! But Jesus is not fazed. Look what he does. First, he sees her. People who are infirmed – the text uses the word “crippled” – often speak of feeling invisible. But Jesus sees her. Second, he honors her. He calls her over and addresses her as “woman.” In this way, the use of language has significantly changed in 2,000 years. In our time, for me to say “woman” would likely be perceived as a sign of disrespect, however respectfully I might have meant it. But in the first century, it was a sign of respect. Third, he proclaims her free. Eugene Peterson paraphrases it simply: *“Woman, you’re free!”*

Finally, Jesus touches her. For some of us, touch is the final frontier, the final place where we hesitate. This is not without good reason. Touch can be unwelcome, uninvited, misconstrued. It should certainly only and always be with the consent of the one being touched. Clearly in this story, it was welcome. After Jesus laid hands on the woman, *“immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.”* Why not? Wouldn’t you, after 18 years of debilitating illness?

Now if we’re writing a script, that might be where we’d stop. We like it when the good guys win! Person in need meets Savior and doesn’t even have to ask for help. Bam! Healing done.

Ah, but there’s a wrinkle. It seems the leader of the church didn’t like it. Why? We don’t really know. Oh, we know what he says all right: there are six days when work can be done. Come on one of those, but not on the Sabbath. The religious leader’s unspoken question is “What kind of religion are you practicing, Jesus, that ignores the Fourth Commandment to *“Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy?”*

But why? Why so rigid? Why so rigid when, as Jesus points out, every Sabbath those same religious leaders untie their livestock and water it. How much more important is a daughter of Abraham than beasts of the field? Why would the leader not rejoice in such a miraculous healing?

While we cannot know with certainty the objections of a religious leader 2,000 years ago, we can know with certainty some of the legalistic challenges to healing in our own day. Nearly 60 years ago Bayard Rustin was the *de facto* organizer of the August 24, 1963 March on Washington. Yes, that March on Washington, the *“I Have a Dream”* speech March on Washington. Fifty years later, Bayard Rustin was a recipient of the 2013 Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of the two highest civilian honors the government can bestow (the Congressional Gold Medal is the other).

But in 1963 there was a problem. Bayard Rustin was a gay man at a time when it was illegal in a number of states to act on such orientation. His presence caused some controversy within the leadership of the civil rights movement, but the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood by him. Bayard Rustin willingly accepted a position “behind the scenes,” although he ended up on the cover of *“Time”* magazine in September, 1963.

But there was more legalism. A few weeks before the March, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, an avowed segregationist, railed at Ruskin in a speech to Congress, calling Ruskin *“a Communist, a draft-dodger and a homosexual.”* There was half-truth in two of the three: Ruskin had been a member of the Communist Party in the U.S. in the 1930’s. He was a pacifist, raised by a Quaker mother. And he was indeed gay. Thurmond’s speech, designed to discredit Ruskin and the March, had the opposite effect within the civil rights movement. One had to choose between supporting Dr. King or Senator Thurmond. Those who had been “on the fence” got off in support of Ruskin. And, as in the Gospel story, the people rejoiced.

But what about the hypocrisy of the leaders in the Gospel story? Thurmond may have had misguided convictions, but he wasn’t a hypocrite, was he? Well, you decide.  In 1925, at the age of 22, he had an affair with Carrie Butler, his family's 16-year old African-American housekeeper. A bi-racial relationship was illegal in South Carolina: then, and until 1967 when the Supreme Court issued its ruling *“Loving vs. Virginia”* voiding all laws prohibiting such relationships. In 2003, the Thurmond family confirmed that Thurmond fathered a biracial daughter with Carrie Butler.

What this has to do with healing, of course, is truth-telling. Whether a patient to a doctor, one spouse to another, or addressing the racial history of our nation, *“the truth shall set you free.”* (John 8:32) Rule-keeping at the expense of the liberating good news of God’s love risks costing the Church a generation of believers. Younger believers, especially, resonate with Jesus’ response to the religious leaders of his day: *“You hypocrites.”* They, and some of us who are not so young, see the Church majoring in minors while a suffering world groans.

President Abraham Lincoln was once asked what he thought of a particular preacher’s sermon. Lincoln’s answer went something like *“The message was well-researched, thoughtfully prepared and eloquently delivered. However, it didn’t ask me to* ***do*** *anything.”* So with Jesus looking on and Mr. Lincoln’s critique in my ears, what might I ask you to do to be healers and to be healed yourself?

First, like the woman in the synagogue, see, acknowledge and touch human need, whether yours or another’s. Years ago I had a cervical neck surgery. The resulting scar along my collar line was uncomfortable and stiff. I asked my physical therapist about it and she said, “Have you touched your scar?” and I answered, “No, I am repulsed by it.” And I shall forever remember her reply: “You have to manipulate the scar.” You have to work the scar to get the layers of epidermis to keep from fusing together. To affect healing, see, acknowledge and touch human need.

Second, expose yourself to new information. Seek to educate yourself and join with others in that quest. With a book group in another church I am currently studying Waking Up White: Finding Myself in the Story of Race, a coming of age narrative by Debby Irving in which she learns the historical and cultural reasons for white privilege and the implications of it. Or Caste: The Origins of our Discontent by Isabel Wilkerson or The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story by Nikole Hannah-Jones, both Pulitzer Prize winners. This message particularly mentioned the need for racial healing, but there are many other areas in which healing is needed. Last week I mentioned firearm safety and mental health. There are many others. Find the one that speaks most to your own struggle to be healed and free, and learn more.

Finally, “find a hurt and heal it.” I said last week, quoting Max Lucado, *“Nobody can do everything, but everyone can do something.”* What is the something you are called to do? You don’t have to do it alone. In fact, you probably shouldn’t. It’s why we’re the church, right? To be in community, to work in ministry together, to journey toward the kingdom of God for which we pray every Lord’s Day.

The subtitle to this sermon is “but how long does it take?” Sadly, for the woman in the parable, it took 18 years. Sadly, for our nation, the struggle for racial healing continues after over 400 years. And, arguably, our need for spiritual healing continues for over 2,000 years since Jesus of Nazareth walked the earth.

Yet healing takes as long as it takes. As our bodies know, healing is organic and cannot be rushed. But we must do our part. So choose to look with critical eye at legalisms that thwart God’s reign of love. Listen with critical ear for those whose speech fosters hate rather than healing. Stop using slogans that pit us against one another and start doing the research and learning that leads to illumination.

And take heart that even the worst circumstances need not end so. That little baby I mentioned, fathered by Strom Thurmond illegally nearly a century ago? She grew into a strong, confident woman named [Essie Mae Washington](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Essie_Mae_Washington-Williams)-Williams. Ms. Washington-Williams earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees, the latter in education from USC, and taught for 30 years in the Los Angeles Unified School District. She learned of her father’s identity at age 16 and was in periodic conversation with him about race relations thereafter, such that he was the first Southern senator to nominate an African-American to a federal judgeship (1976). She published a memoir, *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* (2005), written with William Stadiem, which explored her sense of dislocation based on her mixed heritage, as well as going to college in the segregated South after having grown up in Pennsylvania. It was nominated for both a [National Book Award](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Book_Award) and a [Pulitzer Prize](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pulitzer_Prize).

One other thing: Essie Mae Washington-Williams was a Congregationalist!

The worst thing is not the last thing. Summertime, and the living is healing. May it be so. Amen.