

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, September 1, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“IN THIS HOUSE, ON THIS DAY”

Luke 13:16

Back in May I was called for jury selection. 200 of us gathered at the Brampton court-house. It was a serious case that the jury would eventually hear, involving second degree murder and aggravated assault. We were told by court workers and the judge himself that serving on a jury is an obligation and a duty. But I, along with about 100 others spoke to the judge asking not to serve this time around. The reason was important to me, though as I rehearsed it in my mind, I thought the judge might consider it rather flimsy. But he listened and kindly gave me a deferment. I suspect the real reason was that he looked at my occupation and knew I would not be selected for the jury. Clergy are generally not wanted on a jury for some reason. In any case, I told the judge that am willing to fulfill my duty in the future, if called upon.

What brings you to this house for worship on a Sunday? Do you come out of a sense of duty or obligation? That's not a bad reason to come. Acting out of duty can help us to be faithful people, people who can be counted on. But I hope that you will also come here with a sense of expectation. I hope we think of worship not as a burden placed upon us, but as an appointed time in which our burdens are lifted or at least lightened.

It happened for the woman who came to the synagogue one Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching. Luke 13:10-17. Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He laid his hands upon her. Immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God. The synagogue leader was indignant that Jesus had cured on the Sabbath. He told 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.” But the Lord said, “You hypocrites”, pointing out that they untied and led their animals to water on the Sabbath. Jesus said, “Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, who Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” The answer was, “Of course she should be set free from her bondage, even on the Sabbath, especially on the Sabbath.” In God's house, on that Sabbath day, something very good happened to that woman. And while our situation may be quite different than hers, this is true for us, as well. In this house, on this day, good things are happening for us, too. What are they?

First, in this house on this day and on this day Jesus meets us here.

Jesus called the religious leaders hypocrites. Yes, they went too far in what they defined as work on the Sabbath. But they knew the Sabbath was God's precious gift to them. They took God's Sabbath commandment seriously. Sabbath was a day of rest which pointed ahead to the eternal rest God promised to his people. Keeping the Sabbath was the way the Jewish people honoured God and showed the world that they were God's people. Whatever others did that day, they at least would worship God and rest from work. It was a sign of their trust in God to provide for them. The woman with the bent-over back was devoted to the Sabbath, despite her physical problems.

The real reason Jesus criticized the religious leaders was because they didn't recognize who Jesus was. The disciples once asked in awe, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the waves obey him?" What the synagogue leaders should have been asking was, "Who then is this who can set a woman free from Satan's bondage on the Sabbath?" They couldn't see, as Jesus once said of himself, "Something greater than the Sabbath is here." Jesus once called himself "Lord of the Sabbath." In other words, he was free to act on the very day he and his Father created in the beginning. The religious leaders couldn't see it but perhaps the crowd sensed something special about Jesus as they rejoiced at the wonderful things he was doing. In God's house, on the Sabbath, Jesus had come among them. That very day the presence and power of God had drawn near in Jesus.

It's true for us now. In this house, on this day, Jesus has come here to meet us. The One who was born of the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary's Cross was set free from the bondage of death on Easter Sunday. He is the Son of the living God, one with the Father. He is the Everlasting Man. The living Christ is free to meet us anytime, anywhere. And he always comes to meet us when we gather in God's house on the Sabbath. He said, "Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am, among them." So he meets us here today. He sees us where we are. He knows our needs, yours and mine. He knows all the spirits that cripple us and the burdens that bend us over. He is at work among us, touching us with divine power and healing grace. In this house, on this Sabbath day, Jesus has come among us, according to his promise.

Here's the second thing that is happening to us. Jesus Christ is setting us free from crippling burdens.

This woman had been bent over for 18 years. Satan had bound her with a crippling spirit. Medical people say that the vertebrae in her back had become fused together. But by God's power working in him, Jesus set her free from bondage and enabled her to stand straight again.

Some of us come here with physical ailments that slow us down or cause us discomfort. But even if we are physically well we can still be crippled by heavy burdens that bend us over and crush our spirits. Satan loves to pile crippling burdens on us. Fear. Guilt. Anxiety about the future. Regret. Loneliness. On this Labour Day weekend, we remember that many people are bent over with heavy work responsibilities in this age in which more and more is expected of us. Some people have far too much to do, while some people do not have enough to do. Either one can be a crippling burden.

But in this house, on this day, Jesus Christ is setting us free from crippling burdens. For He is greater than the one who binds us. To those crippled by a burden of sin and guilt he says, "Come and feed at this table for this is my body broken for you. This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins." To those crippled by fear his strong voice speaks to the wind and the waves, "Peace, be still!" To those crippled by work related responsibilities he says, "Come unto me, all you are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." To those crippled with anxiety over the future he declares, "For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future." To the lonely he says, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." He also says, "look around you – you are not alone. You are in the fellowship of my people." To the grief stricken or those fearful of death he says, "Do not let your heart be troubled or afraid. In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." Here today Jesus is setting us free from crippling burdens, so that we can experience the freedom of life in Christ.

Remember Stephen Hawking, the brilliant scientist whose body was weakened and deformed by ALS? He spent much of his life in a wheelchair, using a computer to painstakingly write and speak. A scientist friend arranged for Hawking to spend time in a zero gravity enclosure. And there Hawking was able to float for a time, free from the burden of his crippling disease. He said it was just about his greatest experience ever.

So it is that in this house and on this day we experience the freedom Christ gives. It is a foretaste of the eternal rest and freedom that we will enjoy fully in the Father's house.

Now as a result of being here in Christ's presence will our will burdens be gone altogether? Well, some may be. But likely some of these crippling burdens will sneak back and bend us over again. That's why we often have to come into this house on this Sabbath day. We often need to be in the powerful, healing presence of him who was crucified but lives forever. We often need to hear his teaching and feed on him by faith.

That brings us to the last thing. Here in this house, on this day, Jesus is enabling us to stand up straight.

Verse 13, "When Jesus laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." Some burdens which bend us over will be gone for good today, some will be gone for a time, and some will remain with us. Some burdens are not all bad and we can't just throw them off. Think of the burdens of leadership and responsibility, the burden of service, the burden of parenthood, the burden of providing for our families. These burdens may weigh us down but we can grow under them. Burdens help us develop our natural gifts and grow in Christ-like character. I have certainly grown under the burden of ministry over the past 32 years. But Jesus is enabling us to stand up straight as we carry these unavoidable burdens. The Bible says, "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you." The Bible doesn't promise that the Lord will take all your burdens away, but that he will strengthen and sustain you as you carry them. And right now the Lord is touching you by his power and grace, so that you will go from here standing straighter, even under the weight of your burdens. You will go from here strengthened by his strength. Though I have the weekly responsibility of leading worship, I often feel that way when

I leave here on Sunday. I feel energized and strengthened to face the week ahead. I hope that is happening for you today and every Sabbath day.

There is a bridge which crosses a river somewhere in Europe, an unusual bridge, because it has in the middle a small chapel, which people can enter as they cross over. A person watched from his hotel room as people carried bundles and pulled heavily loaded carts to the market on the other side. He noticed that when people stopped at the chapel for a time of worship and prayer, they came out and took up their loads as if they had been made lighter during the time of prayer. They carried the bundles and pulled the carts with straighter backs and renewed energy. That is what happens when we come into this house, on this day. Here we meet the living Christ, the strengthening Christ, the burden-bearing Christ, the saving Christ. And for the health of body, mind and soul, it's a meeting that you and I don't want to miss.