

Reebee Kavich, North-Prospect Church, March 25, 2001

Luke 13:10-17

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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." 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? 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?" 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.

*Prayer*

*Sermon – Healing on the Sabbath*

Eighteen years. Eighteen long, painful years it had been. I was pretty young when it all started. Just married, and we had just moved here because Matthias had found work. It seemed like things were going great – we were happy, we had a decent place to live, and friends, and we were expecting our first child. When it started, it didn't seem like much. First, the yelling, over little things, like supper. I never knew when Matthias would be home, but still he would come in and yell 'Susanna why isn't supper ready yet?' or 'Susanna, why is supper cold?' And my new friends – something bothered him about having friends he didn't know. Sometimes he was still really sweet, though. And then one day, not out of the blue – I can't say it came out of nowhere after all that, can I? – one day he pushed me down. The next week he hit me – hard. He said he was sorry – the first few times – but that I deserved it. I didn't know what I had done to deserve it – and I never did figure out what to do to prevent being hit. I had enough bruises that I didn't want to see my friends. What would I tell them? What would they say? It was just as well because it was around then that Matthias started telling me where I could go and when. I thought it would end when the baby came – and maybe he did act nicer for a little while. But then he said the baby cried too much. And he hit me, harder even than before, and all I could think then was at least he isn't hitting our daughter. Two more children and things just got worse.

When I got to go out to the market place or the synagogue, I just looked down. I didn't want anyone to see the latest black eye or twisted arm. Then Matthias hit me so hard that I couldn't stand up straight anymore anyway. I limped and my back hurt all the time. I thought about leaving – a thousand times. But I had no money, and there was nowhere safe to go, and no way to take care of my kids. And I was very afraid. When my father visited I tried to talk to him, and he asked, well, what did you do to provoke him?

I was stuck at home most of the time: either I was too sore to go anywhere, or Matthias was keeping me in. But somehow, the Sabbath was different. I got to go to the synagogue. I can't say I got much out of it, in those years. But since Matthias didn't mind me going – and he didn't come with me – I knew it was a few hours a week when I wouldn't get hit – wouldn't get screamed at.

I didn't talk to many people – just came in and stayed in the back. I didn't understand what the teachers were talking about when they called it a day of rest, of renewal, of fellowship.

Fellowship – I tried that a couple of times. Once I talked to a woman named Anna before the service for a few minutes. Later I overheard her saying to a friend “I wish she wouldn’t come here on the Sabbath. She makes me uncomfortable. It’s so distracting. And today she talked to me!” Well, I just stayed way in the back after that.

Then one day, someone new gave the lesson. His name was Jesus. I didn’t know anything about him – as you can guess I wasn’t in on the local news back then. But even to me he seemed special. He was teaching about the Kingdom of God that day. The synagogue was crowded and people were shifting around a bit – a little uncomfortable, maybe? I limped over to the side, thinking I might hear better. The strangest thing happened – Jesus saw me, stopped preaching, and called me over. Woman, he called, yes you, with the limp and the crooked back. Come over here. Well, let me tell you, I felt so conspicuous and out of place. I never tried to attract attention, and here was Jesus, interrupting the service to talk to me! If those women didn’t want me here before, what would they say now? I wanted to run away, but instead I walked up to the front, where he was waiting. Jesus spoke with me for a few minutes, softly so no one could hear it. Who beats you, he asked? I was shocked at the question – most of my bruises that week didn’t show. And besides, no one had ever asked me that. I found out later that Jesus didn’t even have to ask. He knew, before I whispered, my husband. My husband beats me. Jesus didn’t ask me why, or what I had done. Instead he looked at me and said, you are a child of God. You are a daughter of Abraham. You do not deserve this. God does not want this for you. And then Jesus put his hands on my shoulders, and said, loudly, “Woman you are set free from your ailment.”

I felt two things in that moment. First, the pain in my back and shoulders was gone. For the first time in years, I could stand up straight without pain. And I felt hope. The hope that comes when you suddenly realize that there is someone who loves you and cares for you and that not every single door in your life is closed. I had been bent over for 18 years. I had been without hope for 18 years. And when Jesus touched me that all changed. Then Jesus said to me, softly again, I know this doesn’t solve the bigger problem: it won’t end the beatings. But, let’s sit down together and talk after the service is over. Maybe together we can think of something. Now, sit down and rest, Susanna.

Rest! For the first time in 18 years, I knew what a Sabbath rest was! A day of rest, a day without pain, a day without work. A day to remember that when God finished the work of creation, God rested. And a day to remember that I am a beloved and important part of that creation. It was a beautiful day for me – and so new.

I thought the service would go back to normal, but there was another surprise. Jesus couldn’t wait to heal me, and the synagogue leader couldn’t wait to tell him what a bad idea that had been. He interrupted Jesus and said to him, in front of everyone, You can’t do that. Do that somewhere else! Do that sometime else! I’ve had enough of you, with your controversial preaching, but now you’re healing on the Sabbath! That is against the rules. Not only that, but you’ll confuse people about why they are here. Not only that but some people won’t like it! There’ll be controversy! People like it to be quiet and peaceful here!

(I was thinking, it might be quiet – but this is the first time I’ve found peace here. But I didn’t say it.)

Jesus had no use for this man’s criticism. He called the man a hypocrite, which certainly got people’s attention. Jesus said to the leader, and the whole congregation, Susanna deserved to be healed, today. “Ought not this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?” She’s a beloved child of God. She’s a member of

this community, but none of you have seen her, none of you have truly understood her, or offered her your love or support. Do you know why she is bent over? Susanna has been wickedly abused by her husband. In this place of worship, she should find support but instead she has been excluded, and ignored. And healing her is not something that can wait. Nor is changing this community something that can wait. For to truly celebrate the Sabbath here, everyone should be able to find rest and relief.

That day was a new beginning for me, and for the synagogue. Sure, some people were upset, and some people couldn't get past asking what I had done. But we talked a lot, and we prayed a lot, and we learned a lot. And a few months later, after a lot of planning and worrying, my children (teenagers by then) and I left Matthias. Do you know, I stayed that first month with Anna, the woman who had said years before she wished I wasn't there. And when Matthias came looking for me – the members of the synagogue stood with me. And finally he let me go. He moved away to another town and I haven't seen him since.

It turned out that I wasn't the only one in the synagogue who had been abused. There were other women, too. And several people's mothers or aunts had been abused. The more we learned, the more the community realized that something had to be done. A year or two later I started getting the older girls in the synagogue together to talk, to share my experience. And the synagogue leaders would talk about it when they taught. And other bent over women came into our midst. I am happy to say that this community became a place where people could stand up straight, and where the Sabbath was a day of true peace and rest for everyone.

#### *Postscript*

Susanna's testimony is fictional, but not unlikely. It's estimated that one in four women will experience domestic violence (that is, abuse by an intimate partner) in her lifetime. It may come in the form of physical, verbal, psychological, economic, or sexual abuse. One in four of us, of our mothers, of our daughters, our sisters, our nieces will experience domestic violence. However, the transformation in Susanna's faith community probably would be unusual, in first century Palestine or in 21<sup>st</sup> century New England. A more typical response is silence and denial. This month, I have been working with RESPOND, Inc., a Somerville battered women's agency, to develop materials to give to congregations taking the first steps to understand and combat domestic violence. If you would like to know more about that project, or resources available for battered women, please get in touch with me. I'm leaving right after church but my number is on the bulletin.

Domestic violence is a tricky issue. The pain it causes is not as easy to solve as Jesus saying, "you are set free from your ailment" Even if, caring individuals that we are, recognize that something is going on, that the person next to us in the pew is dealing with a serious problem, they may not feel safe to tell us or the community the whole story. But communities can – and need to - build a sense of safety and security. North-Prospect is a caring place, and a place willing to learn – willing to grant careful consideration to the critical issues of people's lives. I believe that we strive for this to be a place where the dignity and worth of every person is recognized, and where healing can take place. And if we follow the example of Jesus, we can become a place where daughters and sons of Abraham are set free from bondage on the sabbath day.

Amen.