

SERMON TITLE: "Freedom Wins"

TEXT: Luke 13:10-17

PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church

BY: Ryan Dueck

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There are probably almost as many different ways of beginning a sermon as there are sermons. Do you begin with a joke, a personal story, a reference to some current event or issue? Do you recap last week's sermon as a launching point for this week's? Any one of these could be a good way to begin.

But today, I am simply going to begin by reading the Bible.

The text I have chosen for this morning is from the Gospel of Luke.

READ LUKE 13:10-17

Last week we talked about faith. I tried to paint a picture of faith as a journey as opposed to a dump truck with an answer box on the back.

We talked about the honour roll of faith in Hebrews 11—about all of the heroes of Israel's history who followed God. We talked about how each of these heroes was a flawed human being who didn't know enough or do enough, but who nonetheless were held up by the writer to the Hebrews as having exemplary faith.

We talked about how the journey of faith requires that we get our "true north" right and about how we have to be willing to follow our pioneer and to do our best to study the maps we are given.

I think the story we just read gives us a real-life example of what we talked about last week.

I think it has a lot to teach us about our true north and about what following in his direction looks like.

WORLDVIEWS

I think it also has a lot to say to us about **worldviews**. Now perhaps this is a word that is unfamiliar to you. It is a term borrowed from the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. At the most basic level, it refers to the map of reality that we live with.

Here's a definition from missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert:

Worldviews are what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living.

According to Hiebert, worldviews serve a number of important cultural and social functions:

1. Worldviews provide answers to our deepest questions about the world.
Questions like:
 - a. What is the world like?
 - b. What does it mean to be human?
 - c. How do we account for the evil and brokenness in the world?
 - d. What is the solution to the deepest problems we face?
2. Worldviews give us emotional security
 - a. There is a lot in life that we can't control—people turn to their worldviews for comfort and security
3. Worldviews validate our deepest cultural norms
 - a. They provide us with our ideas of right and wrong and how to deal with them
4. Worldviews help us integrate our culture and monitor cultural change
 - a. What do we allow in, what has to stay out? E.g., how do we live as Christians in a world where technology dominates?
5. **Worldviews provide psychological reassurance that the world is truly as we see it and a sense of peace and of being at home in the world**

According to Paul Hiebert, this is true for all worldviews—Christian, Hindu, atheist, Buddhist, pagan, anything.

Whatever view we have of the world—whether it is carefully thought out and well constructed or it is just a kind of default approach we have taken without much consideration or it is a mixture of a whole bunch of things—it does something for us like the job described by Hiebert.

This is true for us, but it is also true of the people in the Scripture we just heard read.

A CAREFULLY CONSTRUCTED WORLD

Let's look, first, at the leader at the synagogue. What were his "given realities?" What kind of a "map for living" was he using?

Well, the word "synagogue" tells us that we are in the context of Jewish worship.

Ever since their days in the desert, the Jewish people had been a people of the Law. Law governed every aspect of their lives.

But, Jewish worship was also focused on the temple Solomon had built in Jerusalem (sacrifices, holy days, etc).

After the destruction of this temple and as the Jewish people began to be occupied by foreign powers and taken farther and farther from Jerusalem, they needed to have places and forms of worship that did not require the temple.

So synagogues were born. Jewish worship became more text-focused worship, more focused on law and application of the law.

This is where the Pharisees came from—this commitment to understanding, interpreting, applying, and enforcing the law.

So, for the ruler of the synagogue, I think we can safely assume that his world would have been a highly structured, meticulously managed system.

What was wrong? The Jews were an occupied people. They did not have control over Jerusalem and their own political affairs.

How was the broader culture to be integrated?

It wasn't. The job of the Jewish people was to simply live according to the law in exile. They were not to be contaminated by their foreign occupiers. They were to be pure and set apart and their observance of Jewish law did this.

Following the law was what set them apart and preserved their identity as a minority group in a massive unfriendly Roman empire. It was not optional. The law was all they had.

And of course laws about the Sabbath were part of this package.

The laws against working on the Sabbath are fairly well known. Passages such as Exodus 20:9-10; Deuteronomy 5:13-14 make it clear that six days are for working, the seventh is for rest.

But by the first century, a fairly elaborate system of rules around what constituted proper Sabbath observance had been created.

Deliberate activity/skill in craftsmanship were prohibited—not just work. There were 39 categories of forbidden activity (i.e., ploughing earth, sowing, reaping, baking, washing

wool, separating two threads, tying, untying, sewing stitches, tearing, trapping, writing two or more letters, erasing two or more letters, building, demolishing, extinguishing a fire, kindling a fire....).

That's just a few. And each of the 39 categories had different variations!

It's easy to look at this and think, how bizarre!

But remember, interpreting, applying, and enforcing the law was a form of *worldview maintenance*. They didn't just come up with these things arbitrarily for fun.

These laws were part of a way of ordering a view of the world during difficult times.

It was simple. The Jews were God's people. God had given them laws for living. Their job was to read, interpret, and implement the law. That was how things worked.

For the ruler of the synagogue, this worldview would have provided emotional security and psychological reassurance. It would have meant predictability, manageability, relative security, and stability.

It was a well-ordered, carefully constructed map.

A FRAGILE WORLD

But not all worldviews are so neat and tidy.

How about the woman? There's a good chance that *her* worldview was a fragile and shaky thing. Eighteen years of a debilitating illness will do that.

Suffering is almost always the biggest challenge to any worldview.

The English translations differ when it comes to Luke 13:10. Most refer to some kind of a "spirit" that had crippled this woman for 18 years. A few simply say that she had been crippled.

Either way, in the culture she was a part of, this woman would very likely have been marginalized and viewed with suspicion, contempt, or just plain old apathy.

She was a nobody.

Her "given realities" would likely have been that the world was a harsh and merciless place. It would have been seen as threatening and hostile to her desires for wholeness and peace.

She probably accepted the worldview presented to her by people like the ruler of the synagogue, but it was not a source of security or reassurance for her.

It might just have been one more piece of evidence that whatever the people who were more knowledgeable and powerful than her decided about the way the world was, things just didn't work out for people like her.

Perhaps her worldview was fatalistic. The rich and the powerful prosper. The weak and the vulnerable are cast aside and mistreated.

Bad things just happen to good people and there's nothing that can be done but endure and, one day, escape through death.

This woman probably looked at the world through the eyes of her pain. She was simply looking for release from bondage.

WHO IS GOD?

So we have two people, two different ways of living with worldviews.

I think that in this story, Jesus challenges them both.

In healing on the Sabbath, Jesus was challenging the ruler of the synagogue's assumptions about the way life was supposed to work, and who God was.

Jesus was challenging a worldview that had become so rigid and mechanical that it couldn't even allow room for healing to take place outside its boundaries.

He points this out very forcefully and angrily in 13:15:

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?'

Last week we talked about the faith box—about how we sometimes think of faith as a possession rather than a journey.

Jesus is showing just how ridiculous our religious boxes can become.

He was showing that no matter how carefully managed our way of looking at the world is, no matter how many rules we have, and how carefully we define the boundaries around what can or cannot happen, no matter how religiously we follow, no matter

how much we deny ourselves, no matter how committed we are to speaking the right words about God, to God, for God... *that setting people free is God's top priority.*

In healing this woman on the Sabbath, perhaps Jesus was also challenging her assumptions about the way life was supposed to work, and who God was. She was not a nobody. God did care. People were more important than laws.

Jesus was using the Sabbath for what it was always intended for: re-creation (where our term recreation) comes from. He was restoring and redeeming and remaking a woman who was suffering.

He was throwing open wide the doors to a worldview that had been characterized by resignation, fatalism, despair, and hopelessness.

He was showing that there was reason for hope, that goodness and life were more powerful than disease and darkness.

He was showing that with God, there are surprising twists in the story.

And that God is in the business of setting people free.

AND US?

I think we can see ourselves in both of these people, both perspectives.

1. **Perhaps you see yourself in the leader of the synagogue.** Perhaps you look to your carefully constructed worldview for reassurance and stability and manageability.

Perhaps your map has become a box.

This is a temptation for me. It can be very easy to rely on ideas about God, systems and theological statements, and denominational approaches, and interpretations of Scripture can come to dominate to the point where I don't see clearly.

If I'm honest, I doubt that Jesus is very impressed by my theology. I doubt that he thinks as much of it as I do.

I think Jesus would be much more impressed if I simply shared someone's burden.

Am I prepared to allow Jesus to challenge my worldview? To show me that a "nobody" by the standards of our world matters more to God than my carefully constructed and maintained worldview?

Are we prepared to allow Jesus to alter our conceptions of who God is and how he works in our lives?

2. Or, perhaps you see yourself from the perspective of the woman this morning.

Perhaps your worldview is a fragile and shaky thing these days. Perhaps your map doesn't seem to be fitting your experience.

Perhaps there are burdens in your life that have come to dominate your ability to read the map and follow the compass and you can't see the world as a safe or hopeful place.

We all have struggles that we have lived with for years; patterns of living, physical, spiritual, relational, emotional ailments...

We need to hear that Jesus can and does heal.

Sometimes Jesus heals dramatically, like in our passage this morning. Some of you have seen Jesus heal people, and take away their burdens in a way similar to the passage this morning.

But not everybody is healed. Some burdens must be borne for years, even lifetimes.

While dramatic healings like this one *do* happen, more often the healing presence of Jesus is found today in you and me. We are the body of Christ. We represent him to one another in his physical absence.

We can bear one another's burdens. We can show compassion and grace. We can, like Jesus, choose for *people* instead of for maintaining rules and worldviews and faith boxes.

Whether you see yourself in the ruler of the synagogue or in the woman who was healed or somewhere in between, I think all of us need Jesus to continually reshape our view of who God is and how God works... in our lives and in our world.

The ruler of the synagogue needed to see that God was less concerned about order and power and control than he was about mercy and restoration.

He needed to see that God deals harshly with those who load people down with heavy burdens people that they cannot lift (Luke 11:46).

The crippled woman needed to see that she was *not* a nobody, that her burdens did *not* go unnoticed by a distant and severe lawgiver. That God cared for her.

She needed to see a God who deals gently with the weak and the oppressed.

In both cases, Jesus was helping people to see who God is more clearly.

FREEDOM WINS

The title of this sermon is “freedom wins.”

No matter where you see yourself in this morning’s story, there is freedom to be found.

Freedom wins if we allow Jesus to upset and reorient our worldviews, just as he was trying to do for the leaders of the synagogue.

Sometimes it is painful to have our assumptions challenged. It doesn’t feel good when the very thing that we have to make sense of the world and ourselves is yanked away like a rug underneath our feet.

It certainly didn’t for the ruler of the synagogue.

But if he would been willing to see that Jesus was offering something better and more life-giving than the carefully managed worldview they had come to depend on, he would have found freedom.

Sadly, his response in the text tells us that he chose to preserve his certainty in how God works and the precise details of his worldview, rather than the freedom of a God who was working in new and exciting ways.

Freedom also wins if we, like the woman, embrace the healing God who takes our burdens away.

Freedom wins if we come to see that though life is sometimes hard and not always fair, even though we have burdens (even for 18 years!), even though sometimes it seems like right is powerless in the face of wrong, that there is a hope that is real—that Jesus can set us free *from* the sin and evil that trap and burden us, and set us free *for* a life of love and service.

In short, freedom wins if we stick with Jesus on the journey rather than retreating to the certainties or the fragilities of our worldviews, if we allow Jesus to reshape our ideas of who God is and what God wants from his children.

There is a third perspective in this story—one that I have not mentioned thus far. The crowd.

What can we say about them? They had worldviews too, after all. Like most people, theirs were probably mostly a reflection of what was common at the time. They

probably looked to the law to provide stability, reassurance, and predictability—a lens through which to understand and interpret their situation as occupied people.

And like the ruler of the synagogue and the crippled woman, they saw a man who was saying and doing surprising things. A man who was a bit unsettling, a bit unpredictable, kind of hard to figure out.

They saw someone who was not safe or predictable, someone who ticked people off, who confused and frustrated them. But they also saw a man who healed and restored and provide a kind of freedom and hope that they had never seen before.

They saw someone who didn't neatly *fit into* their worldviews but who seemed to stand above them.

What was their response?

Just one line in verse 17 tells us: They rejoiced at the wonderful things Jesus was doing.

May God make us people who are open to divine surprises. May we never cling so tightly to our views about how the world works—about how *God* works—that we fail to see opportunities to bring healing and hope to those around us.

And may we rejoice at the wonderful things Jesus does in and through the lives of his people.

Amen.

