

“Set Free” based on Luke 13:10-17 August 22, 2010

One of the habits that my husband, Don, and I have practiced in our household over the years is our own form of catch and release. Except for the flies, mosquitoes and occasionally wasp that might find their way into our home, we would try to capture any stray creature and release it into the world outside, or to create a way for it to find its own way out. We knew that we didn't want any of these creatures to be captives in our home and neither would they want that. So, over the years, we have captured bees, moths, and others bugs in containers and hurried them to the door for release. When we lived on our hobby farm and a bird came down into our wood-burning stove during a time of non-use, we found a way to release it into a container so we could take it outside. In my first church appointment in Balsam Lake, a bat suddenly became our companion one night in the parsonage. I can remember crawling around on the floor, opening the kitchen door and the screen door, hoping that the bat would feel the wind and finally fly out the door, which it ultimately did. And within the last two years here in Marshfield we became aware of a scratching and rustling in our fireplace one winter day. On further investigation, we realized that a squirrel had come down the chimney and had found its way into the fireplace. After a day or two of considering this and asking others for advice, we decided we couldn't let the squirrel die in the fireplace, so we took a risk. Lining up boxes, and a mattress, Don blocked off all the floor space that led to the rest of the house, opened the front door, and then opened the fireplace door. After doing that he vacated the space. The hope was that the squirrel would not try to climb up over the boxes or mattress, but would again, feel the air and find its own way out through the open door, which we were later happy to find out was exactly what the squirrel did. In the world that God has created, the desire for freedom is an unmistakable reality.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And on that particular day, a woman was present who had a serious back problem and was not able to stand up straight for 18 years. She doesn't approach Jesus. She makes no request of him, but when Jesus sees her, he calls her over and says. **“Woman, you are free from your crippling condition!”** Then Jesus laid his hands on her, and she was healed, and instantly she praises God. What a miraculous event! What a cause for rejoicing!

Unfortunately, not everyone felt that way. The ruler of the synagogue was deeply offended by this, not because Jesus had healed this woman, but because he had healed her on the Sabbath *of all days*. According to Jewish law, the Sabbath was a day in which no work was to be done. The synagogue ruler is thinking just that, and further he is thinking: **“Healing someone is work. Jesus has just healed someone on the Sabbath, so he's broken the law.”** Then the synagogue ruler, instead of addressing Jesus directly, criticizes the crowd that had gathered, saying, **“There are 6 days in which work ought to be done; come on these days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath.”** But Jesus replies, **“Each Sabbath every one of you unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So, why isn't it the right thing to do to release this daughter of Abraham and set her free from this ungodly, physical bondage that she has been living in all these years, and even to have it happen on the Sabbath?!”**

When Jesus said this, any who had opposed him for performing this miracle on the Sabbath found themselves feeling ashamed and foolish. At the same time, the crowd that was following Jesus couldn't be more pleased at what he had done.

What is it about freedom that captures our hearts, and minds and our very lives? When God created the world he made the world in such a way that there was a balance between freedom and order. When we look at the natural world, we see the freedom of movement and the growth of the plants and the animals. Yet, beneath it all, we also see a carefully ordered plan for their existence. So it is with the human life God created. God has given each of us the gift of free will, that is, freedom to do what we choose, but God has also invited us to live our lives by a two simple rules. We know what those two simple rules are: **“Love God, and your neighbor as yourself,”** –the Great Commandment.

The Apostle Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans that: **“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”** Paul understood the point that Jesus was making as he healed this woman in the synagogue on that Sabbath Day. And while Jesus was aware of the commandment to keep the Sabbath, he also said that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. In other words, the Sabbath was not meant to bind people hand and foot with rules and regulations that prevented them from doing simple and even great acts of love and compassion. Systems of laws are not more important than showing love to God and others. --Because, again, **“Love is the fulfilling of the law.”** When Jesus saw the bent-over woman, he couldn't see delaying her healing, but called her over to himself right away and healed her. Moments later, he reminded his critics and the crowd that: **“She is an offspring of our ancestor Abraham, just as we all are. Why wouldn't it be fitting that she be healed in God's house, on the day that we are to worship and praise God in his house?”**

Our Lord Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection, has given us the gift of forgiveness and has freed us from our sins and guilt. And every day he wants to set us free from the things that bind us up, the things that prevent us from being fully loving toward God and others. This is what Jesus came to do when he began his earthly ministry of **“proclaiming release to the captives.”** And this is what Jesus does each time we spend time with him, which includes the time we spend with him here, in *his* sanctuary, on *his* day.

But it's not only about freedom from; it's also about freedom for. It's not just about what Jesus releases us from, but what he has released us to be and do. We are free to be all that our Lord created us to be: to worship our Lord, to be in close fellowship with each other, to grow into Jesus' likeness, to serve him and others with our gifts, and to share his saving love with others, inviting them into the freedom that we've already come to know, as followers of Jesus.

Where is Jesus calling you to be free from things that bind you up? Where is he calling you to live freely for him each day? As you ponder these questions, remember that Jesus gives each of us the freedom to put love and compassion above all else. Amen.