

“Standing in the Way”

a sermon

by Dan Griswold

Trinity Reformed Church

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Luke 13:10–17

Into the synagogue that day she walked, slowly, haltingly, just as she did every Sabbath day, the day of the week set aside for worship and devotion to God. She came slowly because it was all she could do. Her body would not permit a rapid pace. That day, however, was different. You see, Jesus was teaching there. She had been told about this Jesus. She'd like to hear him. She did not know how much she needed to hear him.

The woman was suffering, her body wracked by pain that would not relent. It was, really, a kind of prison she lived in, a prison of pain. And that bondage was not merely physical, not merely bodily. It certainly was that, but not just that. Anyone who has known pain knows that pain, long endured and suffered, afflicts not only the body but also the soul. People would tell her that she was holding up well; they would remark how they admired her strength; they would ask, “How do you do it?” But deep down she doubted she handled it well at all. Her ever-present tormentor had made her far less patient, hopeful, and kind than she had been, than she wished she still was. She felt that she was being whittled down by the pain, becoming day-by-day less and less of herself.

But she went to the synagogue that day, even in her pain, for it was what she did every week. She was faithful in her attendance at worship on the Sabbath day. She got a lot out of it, an obligation that was a joy and not a burden. And, as an extra benefit, that day she would get to hear this teacher, about whom she had heard so much. It might be too much to hope for, but it did cross her mind: perhaps he would tell her something that would help her to bear her pain, something that would lighten her soul, something that would help her to regain the person she used to be.

Jesus was there. And as he taught those gathered, he noticed her, hunched over, leaning on a cane that was as gnarled as her hands — you might wonder where cane ended and hand began. He noticed, too, that she listened attentively to his words. He noticed as well the tension in her eyes, showing that she listened through a great distraction, an annoyance that sought to lift her attention from his words. He took all this in with his glance, full of intuition, full of understanding, full of love.

He could tell what the distraction was. It was pain. He could see that her body was in bondage, a prison from which her soul cried out for release. He saw all this, as he taught the crowd, as he spoke to them of God's will, of the coming kingdom, of repentance and forgiveness, of freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. He spoke of all these things, teaching them to those who would hear and those who would not. And so he knew then and there what he must do, then and there.

So he called her to him — “You, yes you, dear one!” It took her some time, of course, to get to him, her cane going “clack clack” on the ground as she made her way through the others to reach him. He left his seat from which he had been teaching and made his way, too, through the crowd, and they met in the middle. And when they at last stood

before each other he put his hands on her and said: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment!" And she was.

What a joyful thing! What a miraculous thing! How happy and fitting that good news was delivered to that woman in the form of release from her prison of pain.

But not all saw this as good, as happy and fitting. No, there was one person who was not pleased. He was the leader of the synagogue, and although his last name was not "Griswold," nonetheless it was his responsibility to make sure that everything was done appropriately and in good order, that everyone there followed . . . *the rules*. And he knew that this healing, well, it broke the rules. For Jesus had healed this woman on the *Sabbath day*. Which meant that he had worked this healing on a day when work was forbidden.

"Six days shall you labor, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God." That's what Scripture said. That's what the Law said. Those are the rules. And this healing, it went against the rules. For it was work. And work was forbidden. We've got rules here, people! You've got to stick with the rules! All you who are sick and wanting healing, can't you wait a day? Go away, and come back tomorrow!

Well, what does Jesus think about all this? Let's just say that he was not impressed. By his reply, it seems that he thinks things had gotten to a very sorry state. This temple leader, simply put, was a hypocrite, he and all his rule-oriented friends.

What's the hypocrisy? Well, here it is. Jesus points out that they had no problem with giving their livestock a drink on the Sabbath. That meant untying and unbinding the beast so it could be lead to the watering trough. Really, that's work, too, work involving no more effort than what Jesus had expended to heal the woman. Now, if untying an ox so it can have water is fine, then why do their rules not permit the releasing of this woman from her bondage? If such kindness to animals is permitted by their rules, why is an even greater kindness to a human being not permitted? Truly, what could be more appropriate than for this woman to be set free on the Sabbath, the holiest day of the week, the day on which God had looked at all he had created and said that it was *good*?

But no. The temple leader stands in the way of this. He stands in the way: in the way of healing, in the way of freedom, in the way of this woman's rescue from pain. He stands in the way, and shows that he loves the rules so much, but is ignorant of what they mean. For the "rules" had become a barrier to healing; they had become something that prevented restoration rather than that which fostered it.

But God had given the Law not only so the people would show their obedience and submission to God. God have given them the Law for their own good. To live according to God's Law, it was always understood, was the way to live well, the means by which humankind could flourish and be truly happy. And yet some people had become so fixated on the rules that they forgot the Law, or rather its purpose and central meaning: to bring glory to God and happiness to God's creatures. Of these they had become completely ignorant.

Jesus rejects this ignorant focus on the rules. So, when he came across those who would stand in the way of the wholeness and peace that is what God wills for us and from us, he would not allow them to stand in the way. He walked around them. As far

as he was concerned, they could not finally block the coming of God's blessed kingdom, no matter how stubbornly they might stand in the way.

That's what the leader of the synagogue did. He stood in the way. Out of a hypocritical and ignorant focus on the rules, he stood in the way. "What's wrong with this guy?" we might ask. Really!

So, I suspect that most of us don't understand this man's single-minded devotion to observing the Sabbath. We don't get his focus on the rules surrounding how one was to keep this religious day special. We just don't get it.

In part, that's okay. We're in a different place when it comes to the laws in the Bible. We believe Jesus has fulfilled the Law. When we belong to him, we are no longer bound by the fastidious regulations of a holy day. We need not keep kosher, paying minute attention (as a religious exercise) to the things we eat. We are free from all that.

But for too many of us it's a freedom characterized by ignorance of God's will and the life that can be found only in God's will. We laugh at the leader of the synagogue's obsession with the rules. But how is our abandonment of *all* practices that make special one day a week any better? Isn't our *lack* of Sabbath observance just as ignorant as the leader's over-observance?

No, I think we are too hasty to judge the leader, this man who would stand in the way of that woman's needed healing. For if we are to judge him, we should, in doing so, also judge ourselves.

We should take a good look at ourselves and, in the light of God's Word, measured by Christ's example, see whether *we* are standing in the way of those who need freedom.

We should ferret out those ways in which we may have a shallow or even ignorant focus on rules and regulations, on "the way things ought to be," that stands in the way of someone experiencing the healing, the freedom, the forgiveness, the blessing Christ would give.

We should ask ourselves whether we harbor expectations of others that, rather than life giving, are life denying, that, rather than point the way to freedom, instead bar it.

The standards and ideals we have, the rules and procedures we follow, in life, in work, in church, in faith, in politics: these may be all very helpful and good. We may need to stick up for our standards; and that may bring us into uncomfortable dealings with those who don't recognize those standards. We may have to say "No" to actions or attitudes that strike us as misguided or wrong.

But it's so important that how we do this grows out of Christlike love, that it is directed toward the freedom that Christ brings rather than toward a new kind of bondage: to rules of our own making.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said something so relevant to this, in a letter he sent to an author who had written a book he thought Barth would like, a book that apparently was very harsh and critical. Here's what Barth said to him:

You say many correct things. But what is correct is not always true. Only what is said kindly is true. You do not speak kindly in a single line.

You utter a powerful No on all possible sides. It is indeed necessary to say No too. But the right No can only be one which derives from and is upheld by an even more powerful Yes. I hear you say only No.¹

Are we like that? Do we say only No? Is our primary inclination to reject, to place limits, to set up barriers, to say why things can't be done, should not be done? Has "we've always done it this way" become a moat or a welcome mat, something that constrains or liberates? Have we forgotten — have we ever known? — the freedom that is given to those who are in Jesus Christ? Or is this a concept so alien to us that out of ignorance of its truth or fear of its power we just can't help but stand in the way?

I think we do this. We stand in the way, sure not always, but too often. And in standing in the way we make it more difficult for others to know the love of Christ and the freedom he gives. We give others the impression that the Christian life is about No, and Don't, and Stop, and Avoid, rather than Yes, and Do, and Go, and Embrace. We are known more for what we reject rather than for what we accept. And many don't want any part of that. They see us and think that Christianity is not about freedom, but about constraint. So they stay away, for, really, we have stood in the way.

Of course, it's understandable that we give others this impression. You see, I think the ones we do this to the most, the most frequent victims of our blocking, may be ourselves. For us, Christianity is far more about No than Yes, far more about avoiding than embracing, a whole lot more about constraint than freedom. On ourselves we place expectations that keep us from God and thus keep us from truly living. We carry along our own ideas of how things are supposed to be, ideas that just get in the way when it comes to living joyfully in the light of Christ. Even though we know, in our minds, that being right with God is Jesus' gift to us, our hearts are far from that happy truth, and so we continue to act as if we must earn God's approval, that everything, absolutely everything, depends on what we do. In this way, and many others, we stand in the way.

But just as he did long ago, so Jesus does today, with us. He does not always allow us to stand in the way. He walks around us. He moves us aside. He does not let our No have the last word, but insists on saying his Yes, a word far more powerful than any word we can speak. And so he embraces us, even in our confusion, and leads us from darkness to light, from sickness to health, from anger to calm, from despair to joy. We who would stand in the way cannot finally stand in his way. For he *is* the Way.

May we be given the grace to get out of the way, the grace of Jesus Christ, grace more than sufficient for us and others to know, more fully and deeply, his Joy, his Peace, his Love, his Yes.

¹Karl Barth, *Letters: 1961–1968*, pp. 328f.