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### **The Freedom of the Gospel (Luke 13: 10-21)**

Sarah Bachelard

So there we have it. In the blue corner, Jesus – noticing a woman deemed of no account, calling her to him, and healing her crippling infirmity. And in the red corner, the leader of the synagogue, yet another of the rule-bound religious authorities who opposed Jesus and inflicted petty religious observance on those around him. Tonight’s gospel reading can be read almost as a set piece – like one of those staged wrestling matches – with Jesus and his opponent satisfactorily occupying their respective roles, playing out their respective relationships to God. And we know our role too. Like the crowd before whom this little scene was played out, we relish the discomfit of Jesus’ opponents and we rejoice at the wonderful things he’s doing. We are confirmed in our view of what really matters to God, because thanks to the Gospel we know that compassion trumps formal religious observance, and human solidarity trumps self-conscious purity.

Well, it’s true that this story, like many others in the gospels, is about Jesus’ insistence on the priority of mercy and grace over law-keeping and sacrifice. But it’s much more than a set piece. It’s a story whose richness and beauty reveals what the priority of mercy means and what it requires of us. I find it one of the most powerful passages in Scripture.

Luke's telling of the story involves a subtlety that’s somewhat lost in translation. First, he brings out and contrasts the different understandings of necessity that motivate the two main protagonists. For the leader of the synagogue, necessity attaches to the law – in this case, keeping the Sabbath. He says – indeed according to the text – ‘he *kept* saying to the crowd’: ‘There are six days on which work ought’ – that is ‘on which it is necessary that work be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on

the Sabbath day' (13: 14). But for Jesus, necessity attaches to releasing the captives. In response to the leader's insistence on Sabbath observance, he says 'ought not' – that is, 'is it not necessary that' – this woman be set free from her bondage? (13: 16).<sup>1</sup>

In making this point, Jesus highlights not only the double-mindedness that deems religiously tolerable the loosing or release of livestock so they may be watered on the Sabbath, and yet is indignant at the Sabbath-day release of a fellow human being. He also evokes with great economy and power who this human being is. She's not just some crippled old woman, but 'a daughter of Abraham'. With this simple phrase, he turns her from an anonymous supplicant, into a sister in God, a sister whom Satan has bound for 'eighteen long years' (13: 16).<sup>2</sup> That little adjective 'long' says so much. It's as if Jesus is saying – *look* at her and think about what you're saying – do you really want to insist she wait another day? Do you think *that's* what God is about?

This, I think, is what giving priority to mercy and grace actually amounts to. It's not essentially about relaxing the rules, getting slack about discipline, or letting people get away with stuff. It's about paying real attention to one another. It's about compassionate responsiveness to the lived experience and need of others. It's not merely acknowledging the 'fact' of someone's suffering, but involves the vulnerable awareness of what suffering can mean – how it can blight and thwart a life, how it can make the present seem an endless desert, and the future without hope. When Jesus sees this woman, crippled, bound, this is what he sees and it calls forth his tenderness, his immediate response. And it is their self-satisfied blindness to all this, their easy sense that her suffering is of no real account, that provokes his anger towards the complacent rule followers. 'You hypocrites! ... ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Double Day & Company Inc., 1985), p.1011.

<sup>2</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p.559.

day?’ No wonder they are put to shame. Their vision of God, their much vaunted piety, is revealed as petty, alienated, even tormenting.

The crowd, we are told, rejoices. But I can almost imagine the shock of Jesus’ words generating in the synagogue leader a silence, a space, a new openness. And in this listening, Jesus takes advantage of a teachable moment. ‘He said, therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it?”’ If God’s way is not like this world of rule-following observance, then what is it like? ‘It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches’. And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened”’. These are analogies that evoke images of growth hospitable to life and transforming of context. Significantly, they suggest a certain hiddenness, even anonymity. And what strikes me most is how un-religious they are.

Apparently, and by contrast with the leader of the synagogue and his cronies, when Jesus thinks of the kingdom of God, the fullness of God’s reign, he doesn’t think of crowds of worshippers or scrupulous moral order. Rather he thinks of the emergence of a new space for living, and of an energy that changes things from the inside. He doesn’t think of a particular so-called religious domain, separated out from the rest of life, but of the enlivening and expanding of what’s already there.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer – disillusioned with the self-conscious and hypocritical church of his time – spoke of the need for ‘religionless Christianity’, and this seems resonant with what Jesus is talking about. The point of his ministry isn’t about establishing a new set of observances and rules to get right. No – it’s about being with one another, graciously, mercifully, tenderly. It’s about creating space within and around us for life to flourish, for people to become more fully themselves. Thomas Merton was onto the same thing. He complained of those who thought that being religious ‘means obstructing all spontaneity with clichés and arbitrary references to

God'. All this does, he says, is enable us to 'hold everything at arms length'.<sup>3</sup> A true saint, by contrast, 'is capable of loving created things ... in a perfectly simple, natural manner, making no formal references to God, drawing no attention to his own piety, and acting without any artificial rigidity at all. His gentleness and his sweetness are not pressed through his pores by the crushing restraint of a spiritual strait-jacket'.<sup>4</sup>

More than ever, I think, we need communities capable of embodying this vision of the kingdom of God, this understanding of our human vocation. We find ourselves in a context where much of what passes for religion is about maintaining a separate domain of the pure and undefiled, seeking to impose some kind of spiritual strait-jacket on others. And yet what's necessary is simply seeing and being helped to see as Jesus does, to pay real attention to one another and the rest of creation, to be willing to recognise not only the fact but the meaning of suffering in another's life, and desiring with all that we are to liberate the captives and generate possibilities for life to flourish.

We know this isn't always easy in practice. It's difficult to pay deep attention, to be open to another's reality. It can be costly to create space for life – to offer genuine hospitality or to transform an oppressive context from within. But this is what discipleship is really about – this is what bringing the kingdom is about – and this is what would make a difference for so many in our society, not the least being those children of Abraham on Manus Island and Nauru suffering long bondage at our hands.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 2007), p.23.

<sup>4</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.24.