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What is God really like? (Luke 13:10-17)

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It seems to me that this text is about the nature of God and perhaps, culture.

Who is God? What is God really like?

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on a holy day, the Sabbath. He is there, in the system, teaching. A woman appears, bowed down. I wonder about her. Where did she come from? How come she suddenly is there. Had she been there all the time hidden, unseen? Was she bold, or desperate or hopeful in appearing?

Who is she? Is she a woman of faith? A doubter? A questioner? A searcher?

Jan Richardson suggests¹:

We don't know. We don't know anything about her except that Luke tells us that the source of the woman's crippling illness lay beyond her control; he describes it as a spirit that had kept her bound for eighteen years ("eighteen **long** years," Jesus points out). There was nothing, it seems, that she did to cause her condition, and little she could do to remedy it. There is no habit, no pattern, no routine that this woman can change that will free her—except to place herself in Jesus' path.

¹<https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/08/15/freedom-in-my-bones/>. © Jan L. Richardson

I find myself curious about the community around this woman. Did they hold her responsible for her condition, thinking—as people so often thought in that time, and still often do in ours—that her physical appearance was a manifestation of an inner fault? Did they take any notice of her as she made her painful way among them, or did they allow her to travel below their line of sight? Did they ever pause to look her in the eye, alter the shape of their own body in order to meet her gaze? Did they keep their distance, concerned that her state might pass all too easily to them? How much of this did the woman absorb into her own body and soul?

It is alarming, how easily we participate—however unconsciously—in societal patterns that seek to keep us within certain confines; that keep us from being too distinctive, too creative, too noticeable. That keep us from standing upright.

But Jesus saw her. Recognised her. Called her over. Spoke to her,

“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Look, no judgement.

He pronounced her whole, free. Her life has just become a whole lot better, and she offers her gratitude to God.

‘When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.’ Bowed over no longer.

She knows the source of power.

A good story don't you think? A happy ending.

God heals, restores, here through Jesus. End of story, except for some happy celebrating perhaps..

but, no, the story goes on.

The leader of the synagogue, another stereotype, for the purpose of this story, speaks.

He is 'indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, he 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."

This leader of the synagogue, what about him? How could he say that, it's ridiculous, callous? Yet, is he a good man? A man who tries to do his best and follow the rules and keep order? Is he a good husband and father? Or is he overbearing and dogmatic? An abuser? What sort of person is he really?

We know he is a man of faith and believes in the importance of the law, just as Jesus is and does. But what does he really feel about this woman? And her healing? I think of the culture of abuse exposed in our parliament, and indeed in many churches.

And, what is God like for him? For his argument, God wants us to obey the rules. We all know and agree, 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength', and this needs to show itself in action, but what is the nature of this God?

Bill Loader says something like²:

For the leader, the way he sees God, God is saying: I am God. I must be obeyed. I alone deserve your loyalty and service. That makes sense. The outcome is: we seek to know what God's commands entail, how they apply, and we keep them. Simple as that! Our devotion is reflected in the extent we take that challenge seriously. I could just as easily be describing what many Christians have seen and still see as the universal duty incumbent on all. Is it not also what Jesus himself would have said?

Jesus answered the leader, and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water?" Luke 13:15

Fair enough. Of course, they'd die otherwise. Then he goes on with a rather weak argument:

² <https://billloader.com/LkPentecost14.htm>

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?"

She's not going to die if you wait another day, surely. Keep on with your preaching and teaching. Tomorrow is soon enough for healing.

Is it?

What is important here?

'When Jesus said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by Jesus.'

The crowd seemed to get it, at least here. Jesus' God, it seems can do none other than heal and restore to community. The teaching can wait. Jesus' image of God appears different from the leader's. Jesus' God is primarily a healer, a reconciler.

Not that Jesus does away with all the rules. It is his interpretation of the rules which is different from this leader.

Jan Richardson again:

When Jesus dares to heal the bent-over woman on a sabbath day, he meets resistance and outrage. In turn, he challenges those present to consider what sabbath really means: that in its fullness, the laws regarding sabbath are designed not just for rest but for release from all that keeps us in bondage.³

It seems that

Leader:

'Jesus' basic assumption is that God's will (in the Law as elsewhere) is focused on people's well being. Elsewhere he

³ op.cit., Richardson.

states: 'The sabbath was made for people; not people for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27).

'He is not riding roughshod over the Law and replacing it with new ways.

Luke reports that Jesus said: 'It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for a stroke of a letter of the Law to be dropped' (16:17). Jesus upheld biblical law. His conflicts were over how to interpret it. But the issue was not argument about specific points, but about the underlying theology of the Law, of Scripture. Such conflicts still play themselves out today in such fundamental questions as: How do we approach the Bible?⁴ Who is welcome here?

So, 'What is God really like?'

What if God's chief concern is not to be obeyed, but something else?

Loader again⁵:

'What if God's chief focus is love and care for people and for the creation?

Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are also subordinate to that purpose: love.

God's focus is not self-aggrandisement as it is with so many who have power and wealth and want to keep it, but generosity and giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing. When any of these means (commandments, laws, scriptures) cease to be seen in that light, they become ends and we find people in absurd conflicts about whether they help someone in need or obey God. When those become alternatives, something has gone

⁴ op.cit., Loader.

⁵ Ibid., Richardson.

terribly wrong, IF you believe God's chief concern is caring concern for people.

The key issue is alive and well today. How we imagine God is directly related to how we imagine what it means to be a decent person, a good community. (Look at the split in the Anglican Church this week). Jesus spent much of his ministry, it seems, in a struggle to portray a way of imagining God which more matched the reality. God is not to be modelled on the aloof king and powerful father, but on the mother looking for a lost coin and the dad running down the road to meet a lost son. The facades of dignity are dropped in favour of affection and caring. It is a very different model of God and produces a very different way of handling human life and biblical tradition.

Both models represented in the story reflect deep devotion. Both in different ways protect some things that are valuable. Both are based on scripture. One is healing. So is the other, but healing is subordinate to other concerns.

And so what do we make of it all? We, who view the story from many years and cultures away. How do we understand it? "It is a story about who is God really?" I think.

So, who is God in this story? Who is God for us today?

And what does that tell us about our priorities, about how we live our lives in this world?

Jan Richardson asks: What would it look like to place yourself in the healing path of Jesus, and know sabbath down to your very bones?⁶

God invites you to place yourself in the path of the Christ who desires our wholeness. Together.

God invites us to love and compassion, to generosity and healing, first. God invites us to engage, and to speak up when words are needed.

⁶ <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2010/08/15/freedom-in-my-bones/>. © Jan L. Richardson