

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for August 22, 2010 in the Old Broad Street Church
Lessons: Isaiah 16:2-10 and Luke 13:10-17

JESUS' CHOICE

Some intelligent people today might assert that Jesus makes a poor choice by healing the crippled woman on the Sabbath. Doing what he did *when he did it* would be labeled irrational because he could have achieved the same outcome – healing the woman – without incurring the deadly cost of making more enemies among the religious authorities. All Jesus had to do was tell the woman to come back and see him the next day. There's the rational choice: outcome achieved, conflict avoided.

If, however, Jesus had made his choices in life by such reasonable standards, we might never have heard of him, and there would be no gospel in the healing. True, the woman herself might still have been healed, which would have been a good thing, but the human virtues which oppress the poor and disadvantaged would have gone unchallenged; the system would have prevailed because Jesus would have deferred compassion to virtue. We like to think the gospel challenges our vices and forgives our shortcomings, but the truth of Jesus Christ is that his gospel (his good news of God's coming) challenges our virtues and forgives our triumphs, our successes, and our self-serving notions of the greater good of systems that keep a boot upon the necks of the poor and deprived.

Jesus chooses to set compassion for one woman above religious piety and regulation. Why? We are mistaken if we think him contemptuous of God's commandments, of the Sabbath in particular, or of people's practice of faith and devotion. No, Jesus and his gospel challenge the virtues and verities of religion and secularity alike, exposing for the sake of redemption the conceits and hypocrisies of both. Whether religious or secular, the claim to a greater good that is free to ignore human suffering violates God whenever it forbids, trivializes, or marginalizes compassion. For Jesus to say, out of deference to the Sabbath regulations, "Come back tomorrow," would devalue compassion as God's concern, making the healing seem a mere frill of piety, an optional ornament of religious faith. Such deference to the commandment would undercut the purpose of all the commandments by placing obedience itself on a pedestal above concern for the wholeness and well-being of a daughter of the covenant. It would declare the commandment more important than the people for whom it was given, and it would suggest that God demands unquestioning obedience rather than willing response to God's love, which is a terrible lie.

Legalists would protest that presuming to violate the commandment, even for reasons of compassion, sets the individual above the law and opens the door for anyone to violate any commandment for any reason that might seem appealing at the time. That's the great fear of the legalist: that the virtue of keeping the commandments might be compromised and that authority might be weakened. By just such hard-hearted logic and authoritarian fear does the law become a false god, an idol to which people are sacrificed. Then, the law (which is good in its God-given purpose) becomes a cruel and hateful thing that works against God.

We do not have the right to surrender to any lesser loyalty our devotion to God's redemptive love and saving justice. As human beings, we are created in the image and likeness of God to care for God's world and for each other. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to put his redemptive love first.

The person Jesus heals in violation of the Sabbath strictures is an interesting figure. She is a mere woman in a society where being male is a virtue, a blessing, and a huge advantage. She is humiliated constantly by the posture into which her disability forces her body. She cannot stand face to face with another person or, without further contortion, look up and see the sky. Today we at least pretend to regard disability as a morally neutral condition, even if we do not always treat people with disabilities as equal partners in life and society. The good people of Jesus' time and place made no such pretense but labeled the woman an obvious sinner whose condition exhibited God's displeasure with her. Disability was seen as punishment unquestionably deserved. Yes, that is what we call adding insult to injury, but it also made robust health seem a virtue blessed by God with favor, thereby sanctifying the advantages of those already enjoying them. How convenient! When advantage becomes a virtue, suffering and deprivation become blameworthy sins! What better way to keep the outcasts out, the beggars on their knees, the women in submission, the odd in the shadows, and the shamed ever-penitent for the afflictions pressed upon them?

If you think what I am saying in response to Jesus' choice for compassion over mandated obedience belongs only to pre-Christian times, please rethink with me now. Our reading from Isaiah 16 stopped me short when I came across it once again during my vacation. I was struck by compassion right in the midst of judgment and struck again by the parallels between Isaiah's time and these days in which we live.

Relations between the nation of Judah and that of Moab were sometimes rocky, but the story is told in the Bible of the Moabite woman named Ruth who (like her descendant Jesus) made an irrational choice against her own self-interest because she loved her widowed mother-in-law Naomi whom she refused to abandon to bitterness and poverty. Later, in Isaiah's time, God's judgment has fallen upon the arrogance of the nation of Moab which is getting what it deserves. Yet, in the middle of Isaiah's oracle of judgment upon Moab comes

a plea to shelter its refugees from the destroyer as they cross the river hoping to hide and survive in a strange land:

Give counsel, grant justice; make your shade like night at the height of noon; hide the outcasts, do not betray the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab settle among you; be a refuge to them from the destroyer.

Does that plea from God not speak to us today? The destroyer then was apparently an invading army, but the destroyer comes in many forms: epidemic, famine, civil war, genocide, or economic changes that benefit those with capital but take what little subsistence the already marginalized people of the land may be able to scratch out for themselves.

Blame is such an easy tonic for us if we wish to avoid Christian responsibility or just civic responsibility. Have the inequalities of our society produced corresponding inequities in educational outcomes? Blame the teachers. Are jobs in short supply after decades of sending them elsewhere for bigger profits? Blame the immigrants and migrant workers who come in the shadows seeking survival. Have medical costs soared? Blame the sick and those who can get help only by going, often too late, to emergency rooms. Does special education cost too much when we need money for wars of choice? We not only blame the disabled themselves but also the people who discover the disabilities try to help – as though sending the crippled woman away somehow solved the problem. Yes, it is hard to trust God enough to be generous in hard times. Why help the Moabites when Moab brought the judgment upon itself? Did they not all benefit from the evils of their land? Actually, I don't know the answer to that second question, but I do know many of us, including us together as a church, benefitted from the economic boom inflated by clever deceptions with financial “instruments.” So, should there be no compassion for those lured into mortgages they could not really afford? Do we take toward each other the tort law attitude of “knew or should have known”? Let us pray we do not take that harsh attitude, lest God take it toward us. I would hate to be judged by what I should have known but failed to heed.

Jesus' choice of compassion over the virtue of strict obedience reverberates through the ages to every time and place. He did not take a stand to secure power or prominence for himself. Neither did he play it cagey to do a little benevolence work on the side while keeping himself safe from criticism. Jesus comes to us with *the new* because he represents the coming of God whose purpose is to “make all things new.” It is hard to choose compassion over self-advancement. It is sometimes dangerous to stand apart from popular prejudices and the rage they fuel. But Jesus made that choice for our sake and the world's. His choice of the way to respond to human need, shame, and even sin has become our hope and salvation. What motivates our choices? Redemptive love or some proud virtue that maintains itself against compassion? Which way do we choose? Amen.