

The Temptation of Perfection  
Luke 13:10-17  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
August 25, 2019  
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As we near the end of summer we have been looking at common temptations we fall into and some Bible stories from the gospel of Luke that can teach us a thing or two as we work to not give into them. We have talked about the temptation to walk by those who are in need...the temptation of greed...the temptation to let things of our busy, crazy lives distract us from God. Last week we turned to a less thought about, but not less common temptation – that of peace. If you remember we defined this as a false peace, that which pretends to be peace when it is usually more about keeping us comfortable.

Today we turn to another temptation which we often fail to identify as such. The temptation of perfection.

And this is often difficult for us to even see as a temptation. After all we live in a culture of high achievement. Competition to get into the right schools begins for some before they are even out of diapers. Children are often told that if they aren't excelling at a sport before they are out of elementary school, they don't have a chance to succeed. Pressure seems to continually increase for teens to graduate with grade point averages above 4.0 or many hours of college credits already accumulated before high school graduation. Facebook has become less a place to connect with old friends or geographically distant family and more a place to present a picture-perfect look at our lives and successes. We admire the professional athletes, the physically beautiful, the well-paid actors. And all too often we forget to teach children and adults alike that failure is the best teacher and a great sign of hard work and growth.

But what does any this have to do with today's story from Luke?

In the story it is the Sabbath. Jesus is doing what he typically did on the sabbath – he is participating in the synagogue. In Israel the synagogue had become an important place. Not only was it the local worshipping center, with a **synagogue able to arise in any community with 10 Jewish men<sup>1</sup>**, but it was also the educational and community center as well. The synagogue was, for Jewish people, the center of their religious, community and social life. And, let us never forget...Jesus was a Jewish person.

So, on this sabbath, as on many others, he was at synagogue. He was teaching, again, as was typical for Jewish men. But even though he was teaching, still he was able to notice the people in his midst. And there was a woman present that day, as I suspect she often was, who had been crippled up, bent over, held down by her body, for eighteen years.

She was there, it would seem, for the same reason as the others...to worship, to observe Sabbath, to be with her community. While it was much more difficult for her to get there – after all, imagine what walking just from our parking lot into the sanctuary would be like if you were bent in half, unable to even look up – and yet, there she was, worshipping alongside her friends and neighbors.

And Jesus noticed her. He not only noticed her but he truly saw her, he saw her humanity. He not only noticed her but he had compassion on her. He not only noticed her but he spoke to her, he reached out to her, he healed her.

And of course, then the conflict began.

Because there were others there, in this case Luke says that included the synagogue leader, who may have noticed the woman but who certainly didn't see her bondage, who didn't see her humanity, and who certainly didn't have compassion. There were others there who were

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<sup>1</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke* (Louisville, John Knox Press, 1990), 62.

so caught up in the rituals and routines of the day that they missed the very people who gathered with them. And we are quick to judge them.

As good Christian people, we have largely been taught that when we hear terms like Pharisees or Sadducees or Levites or synagogue leaders in the gospels, that we should see a red flag go up and we should hear the same music that might accompany a villain in our favorite movie. In fact, we are so trained this way that *we* rarely see those people as three-dimensional characters, but instead experience them as props to a broader story, as a means to make a more important point.

But, today, I want to ask us to spend some time with this synagogue leader and his companions, and to see them and their humanity in the same way that we celebrate Jesus seeing the woman and hers. Because while we sometimes enjoy “othering” people, while we too often like to dismiss people as bad or enemy without admitting the complexity that is contained within each of us, we are better and the stories are more real and rich if we are willing to take time with the characters we would more like to dismiss.

And part of why this is important is because if we can be honest, more often than we like to think, we are not only the loving, compassionate heroes of the story, but we are also the ones who don’t want to take time or expend energy or make the sacrifices to do the will of God.

So, who was this synagogue leader? Maybe we answer by saying who he was not. He was likely not a terrible person. He was likely not someone who was unfeeling or who didn’t care about others. He was likely not someone who took his role in the community lightly.

Instead, it is likely that he was a faithful Jewish person who felt honored by his role in the community and who took seriously the responsibility that had been given to him. He was likely

someone who had studied the Torah since childhood, who had memorized the laws, who worked hard – even to his own risk and sacrifice – to follow the laws carefully and fully.

See, it's easy for us to hear this story and to dismiss the synagogue leader as a villain who didn't care about people. But it gets harder for us if we are willing to admit that he might just have been a well meaning person who didn't want to get it wrong, and in that process who got so caught up in doing what was "right" according to the law that he missed doing what was compassionate, he missed tending to the humanity of others.

Remember, it's not that he was against this woman being healed. Verse 14 reads, "But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, 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.'"<sup>2</sup> Had it happened on another day, we have no reason to believe he would not have celebrated right alongside her. His problem, as far as we are told, wasn't the healing itself, but the fact that the sabbath law was being violated.

Because this leader was so caught up in *perfection* – perfection as in doing it just right, dotting every I and crossing every t, making sure that the letter of the law was followed – because of this he missed being *perfect* in the sight of God – perfect in the sense of living fully out of the heart and will of God. He forgot that the sabbath was made for people, not people for the sabbath.

Because we are culture that strives for perfection in the worldly sense, it is often difficult for us to see this as well. If we are honest we can name many times when we have chosen rules over people, when in striving to be perfect – as in following the law perfectly – we have left

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:14, NRSV.

people behind or even been the source of their hurt. And this isn't only out in the world, but in the church as well.

When I was growing up in church the deacons were required to conform to a dress code. I feel certain that ties for men and skirts for women was a dress code that many understood to be about bringing our best before God. And yet, how many people never served in that role because they didn't have a tie or had a physical condition made them uncomfortable wearing a dress or the idea of a dress code left them with the feeling that nothing they had was good enough?

How often has the church, forgotten to extend grace to those who are young or who are new to faith or simply new to church, when they haven't followed our practices of worship perfectly? How often have we sneered or giggled at the one who stood at the wrong time, made noise when it was quiet or didn't know how to participate in communion? In those moments I feel certain it's not for lack of care for those people, but that we were so caught up in the perfection or the rules and the practices and the way we do things that we forgot the people who were hurt by our actions and attitudes.

The other thing that happens is that often churches allow a seeming desire for perfection to be an excuse for leaving others out. Too often the church has used a love of law as a reason to lose compassion. How many people who have gone through divorce have been kicked out of leadership roles in churches because the church claimed religious law required it? How many friends who identify as LGBTQ+ have been ostracized by the church because the church chose an interpretation of a few select verses of scripture over chapters and chapters of compassion and love and expanding welcome?

And so, this story offers us an opportunity not just to praise Jesus and not just to dismiss the synagogue leader...it offers us an opportunity not just to accuse other people or other

churches of the ways they have chosen the perfection of the letter of the law over people...it also offers us an opportunity to be honest about the ways we sometimes choose the rules, the laws, the rituals, the procedures, the tasks over the very people we are called to serve and to love.

Perfection. In many ways it is something we strive for. But when the letter of the law interferes with the spirit of love, then our striving becomes our sin.

And so we pray together confessing our sin. I invite you to respond "Forgive us, O God" when you hear me pray, "Too often we choose perfection over people."

Leader: God, most of the time we really want to please you, we really want to do what is right, but sometimes we get so focused on our expectation of what that is that we lose sight of the very people you call us to love. Too often we choose perfection over people.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: Sometimes we get so worried about if we are doing things correctly that we forget to be kind. Sometimes we get so concerned with being seen as smart or good or right that we forget to share your love. Sometimes we get so caught up in things being a certain way that we forget to do the necessary and important act of loving. Too often we choose perfection over people.

People: Forgive us, O God.

Leader: God, instill in us a love for you and for your people...help us to make the care of people a priority...remind us that how we treat others reflects how we treat you. Amen.