

“Bound by Pain, Freed By...”

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)

**This manuscript is a guide and does not reflect the exact sermon preached at either the 10:30am or the 6:30pm worship services. Different portions of this sermon are preached/used at each service and the sermon takes a spontaneous direction at times that may not be reflected at all in this manuscript. You may watch a video of both sermons on Calvary's YouTube channel, accessible through our website: calvarydenver.org*

There is so much suffering,
pain, and grief in the world.
And just listening to the prayer
list this morning, it hit me again
just how much pain and grief
and suffering is in our
congregation right now.
Surgeries, deaths, chronic
illness, injury, relationship
struggles, concern for our city
and world. It can weigh really
heavy. Some days I feel it in
my bones more than others.
Today is one of those days.

And I had this interesting
juxtaposition this week as I was
thinking about the longing we
all have for physical healing as
humans while I was at Super
Zoo with Damon focusing on
people's beloved pets. That's
right – Super Zoo – the national
pet expo. 1,800 pet industry
exhibitors, four days of
educational classes, grooming
competitions, new product
showcases, etc. It was a sight to
behold. Poodles spray painted
to be characters from the lion

king, one dog whose grooming
told the whole story of a
caterpillar to a butterfly – each
leg and quadrant of the body
represented a different stage in
the caterpillar to butterfly cycle.
Truly – I've never seen
anything like it. There are lots
of stories I could share with
you about Super Zoo – none of
which are applicable to today's
sermon – but let me just say –
in case you had any questions –
people LOVE their pets in this
country. The pet industry is
growing, and we were
reminded by several business
owners, it is “recession proof,”
if you will, because even when
times are bad, people prioritize
their pets and continue to spend
money on premium products
for their beloved companions.
It's a beautiful thing in many
ways and yet as a pastor kind of
peaking in on this pet world, it
was a sad thing, to me, because
how we treat our fellow
humans is not “recession
proof”...whether times are

good *or* bad financially – we struggle to care for one another, feed one another, shelter one another, protect one another, respect one another. We fail, often, to remember that just like pets who want a good, safe home instead of living in a cage in a shelter, we as humans are all immigrants in search of a better life...in search of a place to survive and hopefully, one day, thrive.

To be clear, there are many animals that still need our care in this country and around the world. *And* there are many *more* people who desperately need our care in this country and around the world. Just walk around the streets of Vegas and you see that. That's right Super Zoo was held in Las Vegas. Another first for me, you will be glad I'm sure to know that your pastor had never been to Las Vegas before. Now I have. Since it was my first time in Vegas, we thought we might have time to go see a show one night...maybe a Cirque de Soleil or something. Alas – we did not have time; the expo was way more intense than we thought – however we did walk along the main boulevard the last night and we saw all kinds

of booths selling tickets for different types of shows.

And of course these street booths are all about the discount tickets and what struck me was the significant price drop for a seat with what is called a “*partial view, an obstructed view, a limited view.*” Similar to the discounted prices you'd see for a Broadway show, these are seats that will miss some of the action on stage due to the stage scenery or physical theatre restrictions like support columns or mezzanine overhangs or Cirque de Soleil apparatuses. Some modern theaters are built to guarantee that every seat in the house is a good one, no seats with “restricted or partial views,” however, no one can guarantee for you whether the person sitting in front of you will be 6'7” or 5'1”.

While most ticket buyers are initially resistant to the idea of getting partial view tickets, in cases where you stand to get a good discount, buying them is often a smart move, financially, if nothing else. The truth is, many of the partial view seats at shows are still very good,

and you miss a relatively small amount of the action. And most shows are very up front about telling you exactly what you will miss or what the problems and/or obstructions are with regard to the partial view tickets.¹

If only life was like that. If only we could name what was obstructing our view or giving us a partial perspective on our lives and if only we could just pay a bit more money to buy a better seat in life – one without a restrictive view.

The truth is – vision is a subjective thing. How we see the world is how we experience the world – for better or worse.

Now some of us feel like we have been given a “partial view” or “obstructed view” ticket on life. We’ve been dealt a bad hand and we know we have to play the hand we’ve been dealt even if we don’t like it, right? We look at someone else’s life longingly...thinking they are living on greener grass, when the truth is, the grass they’re sitting on may *look*

greener to us, but they have a partial view or obstructed view in life too. Something in their life is not right or to their liking. Every one of us suffers. We all have limitations. And we all have blessings. It’s all about how we see things. Many, many times we cannot control our circumstances. Most, if not all, times – we can control our perspective...our vision.

Today’s gospel text invites us to ask how our own lives – our own understanding of things like the “law” and our understanding of things like our illnesses and griefs and ailments – color how we see the world around us, even how we see God and ourselves. The good news is, if need be, our vision can be changed, can be corrected and refined. Much like putting on a pair of readers can bring things into focus (ever so slightly) or how putting in contact lenses or having cataract surgery can drastically change your vision...our spiritual sight can be improved. And we all, no matter our physical or

¹ Alyce McKenzie, “Partial View Seats: Reflections on Luke 13:10-17,” *Patheos* (August 15, 2013), accessed on August 25, 2019 at

<https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/partial-view-seats-alyce-mckenzie-08-16-2013.html>.

emotional condition, I believe, can gain wholeness spiritually when we begin to see the world the way Jesus sees it, and when we begin to see ourselves the way Jesus sees us. As whole beings in and of ourselves just as we are AND as parts of a greater whole that make up God's great and beautiful and diverse creation.

There are two people in this gospel story with "partial view" tickets on life, if you will. But their views are obstructed for very different reasons. In looking at them, maybe we can learn something about our own vision, *and* the vision Jesus invites us to share in.

The woman Luke describes in chapter 13 who is crippled and bent over has a "partial view seat" in life. The text uses the strange expression "spirit of sickness" or "spirit of infirmity," interpreting it as a physical effect caused by demonic power, not demon possession of the personality.² We know that she has a condition of some sort...and we don't have any details beyond that except that it "binds"

² McKenzie, *ibid.*

her...it's keeping her in bondage...away from her community number one, but also probably away from living her fullest potential.

Perhaps she has been abused and oppressed. Perhaps her backbone is literally broken or her vertebrae are crumbling. Whatever the infirmity, she cannot stand of her own accord. She cannot walk upright. She can direct her gaze only to the ground below...and it's been years since she's been able to meet the gaze of her community around her. She has suffered a loss of human dignity and connection to community. For *eighteen* years.³

She is, I imagine, also a faithful, law-abiding member of this community. After all, she's right there that sabbath, in spite of her condition, worshiping with her community. And I'm going to assume that this was the norm for her, not the exception...to show up for worship each week.

On this day, she did not seek out Jesus; rather Jesus saw *her*.

³ McKenzie, *ibid.*

He called her close to him and said, “*Woman you are healed from your ailment,*” and she, “*stood up straight and began praising God,*” (v12-13). She did not go to the synagogue that day expecting to be healed. She went because she was devoted either to God or to her community or to a sense of religious obligation, or some combination thereof. She was there. And Jesus was there. And for whatever reason, for which we will never fully know why, Jesus sees her and heals her. Why her? We don’t know. What was causing her pain or “bondage” as the text says in verse 16? We don’t know.

If these unanswered questions bother you, you are in good company. These are the “big questions” of life that we see the Psalmist ask “*Why, O Lord?*” and “*How Long, O Lord?*” and “*Have you forgotten me?*”

We can speculate all we want – but we don’t know. Similar to how we never even fully know all the causes of our own illnesses and ailments or our own trajectories for healing or plateauing or going downhill. We have our own medical

mysteries still today, even with our wonderful science and research and medicines, and like our own ailments and griefs that cannot be confined to words or explanation, the text hands us a mystery today. The bottom line is – this woman was bent over (and had been for 18 years), and she was able to rise up on this day because Jesus enabled her to do so.

Now before we go any further, I want to pause here and just say this is a really important point of good news for us to dwell on and let sink in. We never know *when* or *how* or *through whom* or *where* healing might come for us. For 18 years this woman had walked through the narthex of her synagogue and nothing happened. Until this day...when something happened.

While this story can make us angry and cause us to question – why *her*? *Why not me?* *Or my loved one?*...or the person who is literally dying in the street or at our border? This story can also give us hope. Healing may still yet come for those who feel that healing is a lost cause. And – healing may look

different than we thought. We know this woman stood straight up for the first time in years because of Jesus' healing power, but we don't know whether or not her pain was actually eliminated. She may have still had pain, even though she had restored sight with her community. And we can guess it probably took 18 years of therapy to process her previous 18 years, so just because she was able to do something physically doesn't mean she was emotionally healed.

There is so much we don't know, but what we do know is that with the woman's restoration comes the restoration of the community. Her neighbors now see her more fully. By straightening the woman to see them and by the woman immediately praising God for this act Jesus grants them a fuller vision of the woman, so that, in the end, *"the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing"* (17).⁴

Her "obstructed view" on life was no longer "obstructed" –

and neither was the crowds. They saw her and the power of Jesus in a new light in that moment. And it was powerful.

That's the woman's story. What about the synagogue leader? What about his "view" on life?

Well, we get the feeling from the way Luke tells the story that the synagogue leader is not uncomfortable because Jesus healed someone, but because this healing occurred on the Lord's Day, the Sabbath. Healing was seen as work and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath.

The synagogue leader was not happy with the healing because he was focused on its being done at the wrong time. He had a partial view or an obstructed view of life, just as the woman did, but in a different way. Her partial view was due to her physical ailment; his partial view was due to his spiritual blindness, or his hyperfocus on the legality of how he defined Sabbath.

⁴ Brent Driggers, "Commentary on Luke 13:10-17," *Working Preacher* (August 25, 2019), accessed on August 25, 2019 at

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4144.

To be fair, the synagogue leader offers a clear and compelling reading of the law. He is right: you are not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

We know about God resting on the 7th day of Creation in Genesis and that being the Sabbath – it was meant to be a day of delight, rest, and enjoyment. *And* – it’s also a commandment, not just a nice capstone to creation.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the Ten Commandments are given twice with virtually no difference between the words in Exodus 20 and the words in Deuteronomy 5. Only the commandment on the Sabbath day shows a significant variation. Whereas Exodus 20 grounds the practice of Sabbath in creation (“*. . . for in six days the Lord God created the heavens and the earth . . .*”) in Deuteronomy 5 the practice of Sabbath is grounded in redemption and liberation (“*. . . remember that you were slaves in Egypt but that the Lord your God led you out of that land . .*

. . .”).⁵ The Israelites were slaves and worked whenever their masters commanded them, likely never getting a day off. And so when they receive a command to rest -- to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer -- they heard this as good news⁶...as liberating news.

You see, Sabbath has something to do with both creation and liberation, with both rest and redemption. And we must remember that – especially as it pertains to healing.

On the redemption side, the Sabbath day is a reminder that God has liberated us from all that is evil and harmful to human flourishing. We take joy in remembering that God is redeeming the creation, salvaging all that humanity’s sin has harmed so as to return it the glory God intended in the beginning.⁷

The fourth commandment lists just one Sabbath caveat: no

⁵ Scott Hoezee, “Luke 13:10-17,” *Center for Excellence in Preaching* (August 19, 2019), accessed on August 25, 2019 at https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-16c-2/?type=the_lectionary_gospel.

⁶ David Lose, “The Law of Love,” *Working Preacher* (August 18, 2013), accessed on August 25, 2019 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2699>.

⁷ Hoezee, *ibid*.

work. But over time his command took on a life of its own and what was supposed to be a day of joy in both creation and redemption became an anxiety-filled day in which people worried the whole day long they might screw up and perform a deed of work after all.⁸

Sabbath was created and commanded to invite wholeness, but it had come to be a stumbling block to “worthiness” – if you observed it properly or if you didn’t observe it properly.

And here Jesus shows us what Sabbath was supposed to have been all along. He heals an individual, yes, but it’s also an act of liberation and redemption for more than just this woman...it impacts the whole community...changing how they see.⁹

I wonder – have you ever thought about Sabbath – the idea of rest and renewal – as being key to your physical, mental, and emotional health? Sure, we think about this in terms of knowing that rest is

important to our health right? There’s a “mind/body/soul” connection that’s undeniable. But what about the liberating and restoring aspects of Sabbath? The communal and healing aspects of Sabbath? Could our individual pain be related to the pain of the world...or at least, the pain of our immediate community?

It seems that Jesus is inviting us to consider this connection in today’s gospel text. You see things had fallen so far away from any kind of a Sabbath vision such as the one God commanded and Jesus envisioned. It had gotten so bad that an ox or donkey had a better shot at being treated well on the Sabbath than did a human being (*Hello Super Zoo!! We are feeding our pets healthier and more natural food than we are eating ourselves!*). Since no one wanted to see an expensive piece of livestock die of dehydration on a Sabbath, someone had long ago put in a provision to the Sabbath day regulations that untying an animal for the purpose of getting it to a watering trough

⁸ Hoezee, *ibid.*

⁹ Hoezee, *ibid.*

was not an act of work. But since no one had thought to add a provision or a caveat about helping a human being on the Sabbath, what Jesus did that day to this hapless woman did not meet with the approval of the synagogue leader.¹⁰

Without even realizing it, the authorities had granted a higher status to a donkey than to the average human being! This was a truth hidden in plain sight but sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes to see an obvious truth¹¹...to see how good and honest intentions might have a different impact than we intend.

Enter the eyes of Jesus...who always has the best seat in the house. Jesus' vision in pointing out a seemingly obvious truth to us today should cause us to pause...and to wonder...what are we missing? Are their beliefs or laws or ways of doing things that are good "in theory" but that actually hinder the experience and sharing of God's love with all of God's people? Laws or rules or beliefs that actually hinder our own healing?

In defense of the synagogue leader, maybe he was worried about making an exception to the "rule" and setting a precedent. That's a very human thing. One I'm guilty of...worrying about what precedent this is setting for the future instead of seeing the person right in front of me in the present who needs my help...my love...my healing...my gaze...my action.

Maybe the leader thought that once you start making exceptions for this reason or that (no matter how good the reason is), pretty soon no one is really keeping the Sabbath and it's lost its point altogether. And it's not just the Sabbath. The whole law is like that -- keep making exceptions and it's not really a law anymore; it's more like a suggestion, with little or no power to protect and preserve us.¹²

Truth be told, we regularly agree with this leader. Perhaps not about the Sabbath, but most of us have laws or beliefs that we think are particularly important and we get nervous if we see people not respecting

¹⁰ Hoezee, *ibid.*

¹¹ Hoezee, *ibid.*

¹² Lose, *ibid.*

them. Maybe it's personal things having strict bedtimes for our kids or rules around no electronic devices at dinner or how people need to have their lawns groomed in our homeowner's association. Or maybe it's a much larger issue, like how open or closed our borders should be or how many background checks or laws should be in place around purchasing or owning firearms. Whatever it is, there are some laws we feel you should just keep. Period. End of sentence. And if you don't, who knows what will unravel next?

If you think about what those things are for you, imagine that that is perhaps what this well-intentioned, law-abiding leader of the synagogue believes. He thinks he has a clear view of the law; but what if he has a partial view or an obstructed view – and doesn't know it?

What if we do as well? What if our vision is obstructed by the very things that we think help us see clearly?

You see, the law matters because helps us order our lives

and keep the peace. The law matters because it sets needed boundaries that create room in which we can flourish. The law matters because it encourages us -- sometimes even pushes us -- to look beyond ourselves so that we might love and care for our neighbor.¹³

But as important as law is -- and notice that Jesus doesn't set aside the law but rather offers a different interpretation of it -- the law must always bow to mercy, to life, to freedom. *"Law helps us live our lives better, however grace creates life itself. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. Law pushes us to care for each other; grace restores us to each other when we've failed in the law."*¹⁴

This is what we read in Isaiah – a call for grace and communal justice and restoration. Isaiah chapters 56-66 addresses the Israelite community returning from the Babylonian exile to the dysfunctional and disappointing Persian-ruled territory of Judah in the years following 539 BCE.¹⁵

¹³ Lose, *ibid.*

¹⁴ Lose, *ibid.*

¹⁵ Brennan Breed, "Commentary on Isaiah 58:9b-14," *Working Preacher* (August 25, 2019), accessed on

Jerusalem remained mostly a pile of rubble until the time of Nehemiah (circa 445 BCE), a hundred years after the return. Stark social, economic, and religious divisions characterized the community surrounding the still-ruined capital. The soaring promises of Isaiah 40-55 (*see 54:9-17*), directed to the exilic community on the cusp of return to the land, have met with the difficult realities of rebuilding a shattered society. Among the many problems in Judah were widespread enslavement of the vulnerable by the wealthy elite (*see Nehemiah 5:1-7*), a deep-seated fear of foreigners and cultural change that fueled an obsession with ethnic and linguistic purity (*see also Nehemiah 13:23-29*), and conflicts over religious observances such as the Sabbath (*see 13:15-22*).¹⁶

In Isaiah 56-66 (often called “Third Isaiah”), an anonymous prophet steeped in the tradition of Isaiah of Jerusalem offers a series of sharp rebukes to proponents of cultural, ethnic, and economic exclusion and

generates an alternative vision of the beloved community.

Third Isaiah opens with divine exhortations to pursue justice and righteousness (*Isaiah 56:1; see 5:7*) and to infuse spirituality and religious observance with community-minded ethics (*56:2; see also 5:18-19*).¹⁷

Specifically in Isaiah 58, we see a series of linked oracles that challenge the social sins of Judah. The prophet addresses the religious practice of Sabbath (*Isaiah 58:13-14*), which was intended to provide rest to the vulnerable (*Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Mark 2:27*) but has been used for people’s “own interests” and their “own affairs” (*see Amos 8:4-6*).¹⁸

In verses 9b-14, the prophet presents a series of conditional *if-then* statements that map out how the people of Judah might recover their spiritual and communal wholeness -- for the two are inextricably linked. Feeding the hungry and tending

August 25, 2019 at
http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4154.

¹⁶ Breed, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Breed, *ibid*.

¹⁸ Breed, *ibid*.

to the needs of those oppressed is a non-negotiable starting point for communal healing (see *Isaiah 61:1-4; Matthew 25:31-46*). In verse 9b, the prophet demands that the people “*remove the yoke,*” which refers to the common ancient Near Eastern symbol for economic and political burdens imposed by overlords (see *14:25; Jeremiah 28*).¹⁹

If they do break the yoke, God promises communal healing and blessing that will feel like bright sunshine breaking through gloom (v 10) and cool water quenching brutal thirst (v11). The prophet here describes the measurable, provable cause-and-effect relationship that exists between communal liberation and communal healing. So long as some members of the community are oppressed, everyone is living in an unhealthy and soul-harming environment--even the elite,²⁰ who feel like they have the best seat in the house, who would say, if you asked them, that their vision was *not* obstructed. And yet – it was.

¹⁹ Breed, *ibid.*

²⁰ Breed, *ibid.*

As the Jewish-American poet Emma Lazarus wrote, famously quoted by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “*Until we are all free, we are none of us free.*”

Communal transformation creates the potential for true blessing for all to emerge. The prophet envisions this communal renewal as a physical reconstruction of the ancient city of Jerusalem, which will be built as a place that the people together might truly “live in” (*Isaiah 58:12*) together.²¹

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins his own ministry with a reading from *Isaiah 61* (Luke 4:16-21): “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,*” or as it says in the Message and in our covenant with New Hope Baptist, “*to proclaim that this is God’s year to act.*”

²¹ Breed, *ibid.*

In Luke 13, we see Jesus living out *in deed* what he proclaimed in his first sermon *in word*.

God is not after our religiosity or our righteous actions. God's desire is for our heart to align with Christ's heart. In Christianity, we often use the language of "invite Jesus into your heart," but we risk losing our focus with that language. Christianity is not about inviting Jesus into our heart and world. Christ is already active in our world. Christianity is about accepting God's invitation to live in the heart of Christ...to see with the eyes and vision of Christ...when we live in God's heart, we join Christ's mission for our world. Jesus calls us to partner with him in his redemptive work which includes feeding the poor and comforting the afflicted²²...and in turn, inviting wholeness into our own lives, even when we are still physically or emotionally ill ourselves. Our wholeness is tied up in the creation, liberation, and redemption of the whole world...not just our own

ailment or predicament or suffering. This is not to de-personalize suffering at all...but to invite us to see our suffering in a different light. Perhaps the biggest take away for us today is to examine our own vantage point in life. To resist the temptation or urge to assume we know the law better than others, to sympathize with those who are living with very different realities than we are, and to wonder how Jesus is inviting us even now to release others from bondage and set them free, even if it means suspending or revising our sense of the law²³...and to realize that Jesus wants *you* to be free too. Jesus wants wholeness for us all...which may or may not include physical healing.

We are all bound by pain...but we are freed by the grace and flexibility of a God who does not allow rules to restrict love or place limits on healing and liberation. We are all bound by pain but we are freed by the people and causes that are greater than us, that cause us to lift our eyes and our gaze and

²² Janae Meyer, "Isaiah 58:9b-14," *A Plain Account* (August 19, 2019), accessed on August 25, 2019 at <http://www.aplainaccount.org/isaiah-589b-14/>.

²³ Lose, *ibid*.

look at the problems of those around us and how we can help and heal others.

This is the lesson Jesus was teaching on the sabbath. Not just healing this one woman, but showing the community how many more people in their midst could be healed or helped by relaxing this strict rule that was hindering their vision.

What are those rules or restrictions that prevent us from being a community of restoration and liberation for all? When do we let our own physical ailments or our own limited perspectives keep us from taking part in the redemptive work of God in the world?

God can call us and use us to heal and help even when we ourselves feel bound by pain. Because it is in unbinding the pain of others, that we can, oftentimes, begin experiencing healing ourselves.

“I know this last part is scary. When to insist on law and when to suspend it? For whom? Will things fall apart if we get it

wrong? And all the rest. That's the way it is with love: no guarantees, no assurance of having it turn out the way you thought it was supposed to, no absolutes. Except this: the God who gave the law out of love continues to love us and all the world, no matter what.”²⁴

The synagogue leader sees the healing as a human work. Jesus sees it as an action of God. For Jesus, the law is not more important than human beings. From where Jesus stands, what better way to honor the Sabbath than by setting a captive free? She recognizes this – she praises the God who liberates her. When is the last time that our actions caused someone to praise the God of healing and liberation?

It turns out that a partial view seat is not such a bargain deal after all. Not when it obstructs our view of God's desire that all God's children be restored to full dignity and human community, whatever day of the week it is.²⁵

There are many ways to think about personal healing...and

²⁴ Lose, *ibid.*

²⁵ McKenzie, *ibid.*

this story can go in many directions. Today I just invite you to think about whether or not what you are suffering from or with...might be healed...or even helped a little...if you lifted your gaze a bit higher and sought to help heal or restore someone else's dignity or hope or faith. Who in your life can you heal and help, even if you yourself are still bound by pain?

We are freed by hope and helping others. We are made for community. We are freed by the God who created us in community and liberates and restores us to return to that beloved community.

This week, try a different way of focusing on pain and suffering in the world...yours and others. Simply reflect on how you see your healing as tied to the wholeness and restoration of the world, and all of creation? How can the world help heal your pain? And how can you help heal the world?

None of us is every perfectly healthy and pain free when we help and heal others. We all

lives with a degree of pain. We can't wait for our pain to go away in order to protect others or be proactive in redeeming or alleviating their pain.

We are bound by pain, but we are freed by hope...by possibility...even, by, the powerful actions of our great God through one another.

As Leonard Cohen said, "*Ring the bells that still can sing. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.*"²⁶

Amen.

²⁶ Quote accessed on August 25, 2019 at <https://genius.com/Leonard-cohen-anthem-lyrics>