

# Called Into God's Future

Presented By Pastor Scott Walters on 08-25-19

At Crossroads United Methodist Church

Waunakee, WI

Sometimes surprising things happen – even in church.

Like the Sunday Wydel Armstrong actually took up my invitation to come to worship after receiving a couple gas cards to help get through the week.

He came – a middle-aged African-American – to worship that Sunday in a predominantly Anglo congregation. He worshipped. He shared something of his faith during prayer time.

Eventually, when he joined a Men's Covenant Group, he witnessed to a faith in Christ that belied the difficult circumstances he faced each day. He also shared with those men who life was like as an African-American in Milwaukee County.

Wydel showed all of us what faith is about and what compassion was about. And I know that we were all a little bit closer to Jesus and to those who look different from us, than we were before.

Something surprising like that happened one day when Jesus was in the synagogue. It was the Sabbath, the day when all work stopped for his people and people went to their village synagogue. Jesus was teaching that day, and a woman walked in and quickly took her seat. She had a major curvature of the spine. For eighteen years she's lived with it.

It was more than a physical problem. Because in her culture, there was strong suspicion that a physical illness was the result of sin or, at the very least, being in the grip and under control of a demon.

And so her condition was not only incredibly painful; it was also socially isolating. She was alone, lonely, always.

She doesn't ask for healing, doesn't ask for anything. She simply walks in as quietly as she can, sits down to listen. Jesus sees her, stops teaching, is compelled by what he sees, calls to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And when he places his hands on her, she stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years, looking someone in the face for the first time in eighteen years, and, understandably, begins praising God. All this right in the middle of the synagogue service.

The leader of the synagogue, the person in charge, a good, solid member of the community, a faithful man who knows his faith in and out, is not only surprised but is also very unhappy with Jesus' behavior. It's wrong. He turns to the congregation and says something like, "It's one thing to be a young idealist, passionate about human suffering, but there is a time and place for everything, and what he just did violates our sacred, holy law. Everyone knows that no work is to happen on the sabbath. And everyone knows that healing has always been defined as a kind of work, just like cooking, making beds, taking out the trash. He could have said, "Sister, I'd like to help you. I can help you. Come back a few minutes after six."

For Jesus, however, human need takes precedence over religious law. For Jesus, faith ought to support -- not prevent -- wholeness, reconciliation, and restoration.

And so his response equally sharp to the sharp reprimand of the rabbi: "Hypocrites!" Jesus is angry at the way his own faith and the beautiful law that had sustained his people for centuries, was being used to prevent love from being expressed.

Now I want to be very clear about something with you. Jesus was a Jew. Peter, James, and John were Jews. His called disciples were all Jews. This is a Jewish story taking place in a Jewish synagogue, and there is a disagreement between Jews about the meaning of a central, basic Jewish law and tradition. And the more you think about it, the more that conflict appears within Christianity, and within all faiths and their institutions and laws and rituals and traditions.

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And this is not a story against the Sabbath or against keeping the Sabbath. Keeping the Sabbath is central to Judaism. In fact, the idea of Sabbath—six days for work and the seventh for rest—is part of the genius of Judaism.

The problem in that little synagogue was that the leader, a good person, missed an occasion of God's love. The whole law is an expression of holy love. It is a gift.

The Law keeps the vitality of the community. Its restrictions—its no's—are to keep the bonds of community strong and the individuals in it healthy. The law always points to God and the mysterious reality of God's love.

And here it is used to prohibit the expression of that love. The law allows you to bring your donkey to water on the Sabbath. Jesus said, who wouldn't allow this woman to be given her life back?

It's not an easy lesson for us to learn, however. Our customs and traditions our hymns and rules becomes ends in themselves. We forget the beauty of why they were created in the first place. No and no faith is immune.

Today, Jesus shows us a God who is big enough: a God bigger than religious laws and traditions, bigger even than our most eloquent theologies and creeds. Jesus shows us a God who is passionately for all people, a God whose love simply knows no boundaries.

Those people in the synagogue that day responded to the healing of that woman's body in one of two ways. Some probably responded like the Pharisees, who enforced the rules at the expense of neglecting peoples' burdens.

The vast majority of those in synagogue that day, rejoiced over the healing of that unnamed woman's back. And you know, I believe they were never the same after that synagogue service.

Sometimes surprising things happen – even in church (like the day Wydel Armstrong came to worship), or, as in today's Gospel, in synagogue.

Ordinary people, living their lives, doing the best they could, working hard, caring for their families, and once a week gathering to be reminded of what it's all about, that there is a purpose to all of this, that each small life matters.

And sometimes, God is able to use one such life to touch and transform everyone else's understanding of what it means to love. Someone who might otherwise be considered "on the outs" – like that of a black man sharing in a mostly white church or the consistent faith of a woman whose back hasn't allowed her to see the sun for 18 years.

Dear friends in Christ: The Gospel says, "The entire crowd was rejoicing." You bet they were. They knew love when they saw it.