

# Sermon for Sunday, August 25, 2019 - "Seeing Clearly"

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
August 25, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Imagine what it's like for the woman in our Gospel reading today. For the first time in 18 years she can stand up straight, move freely, raise her head to the sun. Imagine how her perspective changes as well. For 18 years, her eyes have been cast down at the ground. Once she's raised up, her gaze is lifted up as well. She can take in the whole horizon. She can look a loved one in the eye. The whole world is now in her line of sight. She can see so many reasons to give thanks and praise to God.

Yet, just as she's being lifted up and her vision expanded, a synagogue leader's eyes are narrowing in anger and judgment. When the leader sees this woman healed on the Sabbath, he becomes indignant. We're told *"he kept saying to the crowd"* that she is wrong to seek healing on the Sabbath. Rather than rejoicing that she is lifted up, he criticizes her telling her she should have waited to seek healing. Just as she stands tall for the first time in 18 years, he seeks to take her back down a notch.

This angers Jesus. Jesus rebukes the leader and those he's stirred up. He turns their argument about the Sabbath on its head, and we're told "all his opponents were put to shame." Jesus lifts the woman up and tears his opponents down.

This has all the makings of a blockbuster movie – a little guy lifted up by a powerful hero, the bad guys who interfere, the happy ending when the good guys prevail. It sounds like an inspiring story from the Olympics – a humble person wins the attention of a heroic coach, overcomes great odds, and her opponents are put to shame. It's tempting to read the news of our day into this story. A woman is being oppressed and Jesus stands with her against all of them. It sounds like a story with clear good guys and bad guys.

We're often tempted to use stories like this to view ourselves as the winners and our opponents as the losers - to think we are on the side of helping people and our opponents are angry hypocrites who should be convicted by Jesus, who should be ashamed of themselves.

Yet this story is not about who is good and who is bad. It's about how Jesus raises up and tears down to set us all free.

Jesus' ministry is all about lifting up the lowly and humbling the proud. Even before Jesus was born, his mother Mary sang in her Magnificat that this is what Jesus would do. Yet, this raising up and bringing down is not to make winners and losers, to reward and punish. Jesus lifts up and humbles in order to free us all from everything that binds us, everything that prevents us from seeing clearly.

The leader of the synagogue needs freeing and healing as much as the woman who is bent over. It's important to be clear: His problem is not that he was trying to keep the law. Christians have often used this story to say, "Jews are too legalistic. They got it wrong and now we've got it right." That isn't what is going on here.

The problem isn't that this man wanted to protect the Sabbath. Jesus knows that the Sabbath day of rest is a wonderful gift that should be honored and protected. Sabbath allows all of creation to rest, to experience freedom from the demands of work.

So, protecting the Sabbath isn't the issue and it isn't actually what the guy is doing here.

The problem is this synagogue leader is unable to see clearly. Like the woman, his vision is narrowed by his condition. He can't see the person in front of him as a "daughter of Abraham", a sister in faith. He can't see that she desperately needs the rest and freedom that Sabbath offers. He's so bound by judgment and righteous indignation that he can't recognize a reason to rejoice when Jesus sets the woman free. He needs to be taken down a notch so that his gaze can be turned to his neighbors around him. He needs the obstacles in his way torn down. He needs to be healed just as much as the woman does.

For him, healing requires being brought down. For the woman, it requires being lifted up. At times each of us needs to be raised up; at times each of us needs to be humbled.

In a world that trains us to judge good and bad and to look for winners and losers, we all need healing. We all need our perspective changed so that we will see one another not as good or bad but as beloved children of God. We need the obstacles to our sight named and identified so that we all can be set free.

This is what God does for us in worship. In worship we are convicted and forgiven. We are humbled and lifted up. Then God sends us out into the world into difficult conversations, into situations that will make us uncomfortable, into opportunities to develop mutual relationships with others. God is at work in all of this to heal us, to heal the whole creation.

Who do you struggle to see as beloved of God?  
Where does indignation work to blind and constrict you?  
In what ways do you need to be lifted up today?  
God is here today to free you, to free us all.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.