

## Proper 16 C 2016 Sermon

### *Luke 13:10-17*

*Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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 day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

*[Most of what I share with you today comes from Fr. John Shea.<sup>1</sup>]*

Last December, Wheaton College professor Larycia Hawkins decided that, in solidarity with her Muslim friends, she would wear a headscarf throughout the season of Advent. Then she quoted Pope Francis, who had said just the previous week that Christians and Muslims "worship the same God." Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian College, suspended her (a tenured professor!), insisting that Muslims and Christians do NOT worship the same God, and that her statement was contrary to the rules, regulations, and dogma of the College.

Now I think there are two ways of interpreting this. First, if Muslims and Christians both believe that there exists *in reality* only one God, then this one God *must* be – by simple logic – the only God Christians *or* Muslims could possibly worship, since there are no other gods. In this interpretation, Pope Francis and Prof. Hawkins are undoubtedly correct.

But if by saying that Muslims and Christians worship the "same God" we mean that Muslims and Christians agree on all the *traits* and *characteristics* of this One God, then Wheaton College's position is understandable; for attributes of God revealed in Jesus can differ in some ways from the attributes ascribed to God by some Muslims. Indeed, the attributes ascribed to God by different *Christians* often differ dramatically; and in **that** sense, not all *Christians* worship the same God. For instance, I have known some Christians who believe in a very harsh, unforgiving, punishing god, and I must say that I do not believe in that god – one could say we do not worship the same God.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus and the leader of the synagogue, while both Jews, can be said to believe in different Gods and have different theologies. The synagogue leader's God is most concerned about religious **laws** (in this case, the Sabbath laws); whereas Jesus' God is most concerned with people. As Jesus says in another place, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath..." (Mark 2:27) The leader of the synagogue in today's Gospel seems to disagree.

Fr. John Shea notes that we 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans live in a "medically saturated culture." He notes that, upon hearing today's Gospel story, **we** might immediately begin to wonder what this woman's diagnosis is. Disk degeneration? Osteoporosis? Spondylitis? "Even if we believe that God in Jesus is capable of working such miracles," Fr. Shea remarks, "[**we** wonder:] how were the damaged bones, tissues, and nerves repaired?" But the Gospel story doesn't mention any details of the woman's illness, because the culture of Jesus' day was **not** a *medically* saturated culture, but rather a *theologically* saturated culture. They were not concerned with the "how" of the cure; they were concerned with its meaning.

Now, "The miraculous cure of the bent-over woman centers around **Jesus'** theology of mission, the **synagogue's** theology of illness and of women, and **both** of their theologies of Sabbath," writes Fr. Shea. "In particular, the woman's [crippled] condition is a symbolic rendering of the [harmful] effect of *synagogue theology*, and the woman's cure is a symbolic rendering of the [liberating] effect of *Jesus' theology*..."

"[Now, organizations and societies can be said to have a certain "spirit" about them and within them.] The synagogue is a social organizational structure that has an inner spirit. The woman suddenly appears within the synagogue with an inner, oppressive spirit that has kept her crippled for eighteen years. Now, she **may** have brought this spirit into the synagogue with her... [On the other hand, Luke's telling us that she "just then appeared" in the synagogue could mean] she is [outwardly] manifesting [and revealing] what the inner spirit of the synagogue does to women. Her bent-over condition [then] reflects the general tendencies of a religion that uses its theology and laws to oppress people rather than liberate them." As Jesus said earlier in Luke's Gospel, "How terrible... for you teachers of the Law! You put onto people's backs loads which are hard to carry, but you yourselves will not stretch out a finger to help them carry those loads." (Luke 11:46). This is what John Shea is talking about when he says the "spirit of the synagogue" is oppressive.

Fr. Shea continues: "Jesus, through his words and deeds, immediately *corrects* the impact of the [oppressive] spirit of the synagogue. When he sees [the woman] and calls her to himself, she becomes visible. One of the latent functions of theological perspectives that subordinate females to males [as in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Judaism] is that it makes women invisible. The bodily symbol of being bent over

means the person is never at eye level. They do not see others face to face nor are they seen face to face. When Jesus talks to her, he breaks the custom of men avoiding women in public. His [calling her] ‘woman’ is not simply a gender designation. It is a mark of respect. In the Spirit-driven mission of Jesus, the invisible become visible, the ones at the margins become the center of attention.

“Also, when Jesus touches her, he overrides the... fears of contamination from her... crippled condition or from the possibility she may be menstruating [fears resulting from the theology of the Synagogue]. But Jesus’ welcome is not the act of a rebel, ignoring tradition and custom. His actions of calling her out, talking to her, touching her, and healing her are [*also*] theologically motivated, [coming from **Jesus**’ theology of what God is like. For Jesus] is doing what God has done from the beginning—freeing people from what oppresses them. What God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, God says throughout history— ‘Let my people go!’ (Exod 7:16). If no one else in the synagogue knows this, ... Jesus and the woman do. When she stands straight, dignified, and whole, she praises God.”

But the leader of the synagogue, with his rule-oriented understanding of God, is furious. “His theology is a boa constrictor that has squeezed all the compassion out of him,” writes Fr. Shea. “Instead of rejoicing at the liberation of the woman, he becomes indignant because his theological understanding of the Sabbath has been violated. He is obviously one of those... who is always waiting to be offended...”

“...Jesus cures on the Sabbath, and so he forces a question about the nature and intentions of God. Is God really concerned with restricting the activity of people, even healing activity, on the Sabbath? Is not God concerned with freeing people from what bends them over and bringing them to full stature? Is not God actively present, bringing about the divine dream for creation? What Jesus has done is not a random healing. This is the restoration of the goodness of creation, cooperating with the Spirit of God who brought all things into being. As such, it is a revelation profoundly at odds with a God who enforces laws and punishes transgressors. Jesus’ God is **not** the God of the leader of the synagogue...”

Fr. Shea continues: “[Now,] I would *like* to paint the leader of the synagogue as an insensitive chauvinist... In that way, I could dismiss him, fairly confident that we have nothing in common. But I suspect a fuller appreciation would see him as a victim of his theology [his understanding of what God is like]. His theologically structured mind only allows him to see the stooped woman as a sinner being punished for her sins. The theologically structured mind of *Jesus* sees a bent-over daughter of Abraham who needs to stand straight. Different theologies allow us to see different realities.

“When theologies are *abstractly* considered, they are evaluated by their fidelity to Scripture and tradition and their internal consistency. However, when theologies are living in the minds of people, there are other criteria. The question is: how

are the theologies functioning? What do they *keep* us from seeing and what do they *make* us consider? What inner attitudes do they validate? What outer behaviors do they encourage?” Fr. Shea then lists several different theological perspectives and their possible consequences.

“A theology that emphasizes **personal** sin may let **structural** [institutional] injustice off the hook. A theology that emphasizes God as king may encourage mindless compliance to authority. A theology that emphasizes the sufferings and death of Christ may sap the joy of creation out of its adherents. A theology that emphasizes afterlife salvation may encourage apathy toward the struggles of **this** world. A theology that emphasizes God as Father may validate treating women as an inferior gender. A theology that emphasizes the infallibility of the church may tempt leaders to hide ecclesial flaws. A theology that emphasizes life may shy away from situations where biological and social life is diminishing. A theology that emphasizes petitionary prayer may keep people from developing abilities that are able to respond to difficult situations. A theology that emphasizes that procreation carries the universality of original sin may insinuate that sex is necessary but not sacred. A theology that emphasizes that Christ is present in Word and Sacrament may overlook the presence of Christ throughout creation. A theology that emphasizes there is only **one** path to salvation may encourage a negative evaluation of people on other paths.

“When people hold theologies, the theologies also hold them... Theologies are ideas in the mind; and ideas in the mind can subtly support attitudes and behaviors we may not want.

“The delusion is that we can find and formulate the **right** theology, the theology that will *only* have **positive** effects on attitudes and behaviors. But we are too psychologically and socially complex for so simple a solution. Rather, we need to develop the discipline of [questioning and humility]... When we know the *limits* of our ideas, we also know their potential. As spiritual traditions have steadfastly insisted, true wisdom is to know that we do **not** know. One way of setting people free is to become suspicious of the theological ideas that hold them in bondage” and to have deep humility regarding their understanding of God.

When I read about Wheaton College suspending Dr. Larycia Hawkins over her comment that Muslims and Christians worship the same God, I couldn’t help but remember the words of one of Wheaton’s most famous graduates, Billy Graham, who said:

“[God is] calling people out of the world for His name, whether they come from the Muslim world or the Buddhist world or the Christian world or the nonbelieving world, they are members of the Body of Christ, because they’ve been called by God. They may not even know the name of Jesus, but they know in their hearts that they need something that they don’t have, and they turn to the

only light that they have, and I think that they are saved, and that they're going to be with us in heaven."<sup>2</sup>

I wonder: Do Billy Graham and the leaders of his alma mater believe in the same God?

In what God do *you* believe?

AMEN

<sup>1</sup> John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2006, pp. 239-244

<sup>2</sup> from a 1997 interview with Robert Schuller, as cited in Rob Bell's *Love Wins, Enhanced Edition*, HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.