

Deuteronomy 5:12-15

*Psalm 119:33-35, 36-38, 39-40 Psalm response: By Your Word, You give us life.*

Romans 14:5-9

Luke 13:10-17

**The Law was Made for Woman,  
Not Woman for the Law  
September 9, 2007 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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This passage from Luke's gospel is one not included in the Sunday lectionary of the church. One can see why. Its implications are radical. For patriarchs, this is a story best forgotten. But first, let's look at the reading from Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 prepares us for the gospel story. It tells us that work is prohibited on the Sabbath. This law applies to men, women, slaves and animals. As is so often the case in life, the law is clear. It's the interpretation that's difficult. It's the latter that Jesus addresses in the gospel: What is work for purposes of this law? The Psalm extols the value of God's law. It forces individuals out of our selfish focus on ourselves and into consideration of the big picture. According to the Psalm, obedience to the law, which means authentically listening to the law, challenges and enlarges one's perspective.

One of the many differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians in the early church is evident in the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans. Some observed the Sabbath, others did not. Paul urges each to carry on with their own custom, while respecting the different customs of others. At least as to this important practice, all Christians don't have to have the same custom to be part of the same community. A refreshing thought!

And that brings us to the story of the Bent-Over Woman. This story is one of conflict; conflict between the law and life, conflict between the law and compassion, conflict between law and healing, ultimately, conflict between law and the good.

The meaning of Luke's story is in the details. It's important to note the details.

Luke divides the story into two parts. In the first part, we learn that it's the Sabbath, and Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. He notices a woman in the synagogue assembly. She is bent over, unable to stand up straight, and has been that way for **18 yrs!** The number 18 is a multiple of 12, one of those sacred numbers that imply completeness and perfection. 18 is one and a half times 12. Luke is telling us that this woman has been in this condition virtually forever. When Jesus sees the woman, when he sees her condition, he responds. He takes the initiative. He calls her forth into the midst of the community. Once in their midst, Jesus "lays his hands on her". He also speaks to her and his words to her are compelling: "Woman", he says, "you are set free of your infirmity."

The woman stands up straight and praises, not Jesus, but God. This woman understands Who is healing her, Who is making her upright, Who is rectifying her condition.

The second part of the story focuses on the response of people in the synagogue to Jesus' healing of the woman. The ruler of the synagogue speaks up. He is indignant. He objects to Jesus' healing the woman. Likely, he objected to the implications of the healing and the manner and setting of the healing. He says to the assembly: There are six days a week for healing. If you want healing, come on a day other than the Sabbath. Implicitly, and not subtly, his words are a criticism of Jesus and the action he has taken on the woman's behalf.

The synagogue ruler's interpretation of the law, given the facts, makes Jesus angry: "You hypocrites!", he says! He goes on to point out that they, the critics, "untie" their animals on Sabbath to water them. Should he not, he challenges them, untie this woman from her shackles?

Details in the story make clear that the story is not only about this unnamed woman and her physical condition. The woman and her condition have symbolic significance, especially in the setting in which the encounter occurs. In the midst of the worshipping assembly, Jesus describes the unnamed woman as "Daughter of [Sarah and] Abraham", a unique designation in the New Testament tradition. Jesus refers to her condition as "chains", or "bonds" or "shackles". Her condition is that of being a woman, an infirmity in her culture, an infirmity in her culture which keeps her down, especially in the worshipping community. Her cultural infirmity, not merely her physical infirmity, needs healing.

In the story, Jesus' outspoken opponent is a religious leader. Apparently there were some in the synagogue who agreed with the synagogue ruler because Luke tells us "they" are shamed by Jesus' words. By contrast, "the whole people rejoice" at the marvels Jesus is accomplishing among them. One of these marvels is the straightening up, the rectifying of woman's inferior situation in the synagogue and in worship. The contrast between the religious leaders and the people is familiar. Most of the people were ready. The religious leader is not.

Luke's story reminds me of the church today. In our time, God also is accomplishing marvels in our midst. As we said at Easter, there *IS* an uprising in our church. One of these marvels is the up-rising of women. Women are rising up and taking their place at the center of the worshipping community, taking their place as co-equal partners with men. There are some in our church, especially religious leaders, who oppose this interpretation and revision of Canon law, those who would continue to use Canon law to tie women up, keep women bent-over, keep women in roles of submissive servitude. But, in contrast, *so many* in the church rejoice. So many *ARE* ready, ready to live the discipleship of equals Jesus practiced two thousand years ago. What's happening here at MMACC is a marvel of God being worked among us. Like the worshipping assembly present in Luke's story when God rectified the condition of the bent-over woman, we have only to rejoice!