

“Dancing, With Shame”
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury
Psalm 71:1-6; Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

Richard E. Otty
August 21, 2016

This morning’s Gospel lesson takes place in the synagogue, on the Sabbath. The lesson has two distinct scenes. In the first, Jesus sees a woman bent over, calls her to him, and heals her. In the second scene, Jesus responds to the synagogue leaders’ reaction to the healing. Let us read Luke 13 together, with specified parts for women and men as printed in the bulletin.

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

***Women:* 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.*

***Women:* 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,

***Men:* 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 Jesus 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 Jesus said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing.

The drama of this story begins before the healing, when Jesus first notices the woman enter the synagogue while he is teaching. The bent over woman asks for nothing. In fact, she speaks no words in the entire text.

We can imagine murmurs among the crowd, not at the appearance of the woman, but when Jesus stopped teaching and called the woman forward. He asks her no questions – Jesus knows what to do and what to say. We might hear the murmurs grow into gasps when Jesus “has the audacity to touch her, risking ... defilement” because disability often made one ritually unclean. [Nickle, Keith, Preaching the Gospel of Luke, (Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2000), p.147.]

I can imagine the synagogue gossip erupting like fire. Small groups chatter with each other. Then, suddenly, the synagogue leader silences the crowd, holds high the Torah, and reminds them healing on the Sabbath day “is against the rules!”

I was surprised not to find more paintings of this story. Yet, as I thought about how painters may have captured this story, I realized it would be hard to portray in a single painting. So, this morning, I would like us to imagine a series of paintings capturing not only the characters and setting, but the underlying message the story tells.

The first painting I imagine is actually of the second scene of our lesson. This painting would have bright light focused on Jesus and the synagogue leader, the parties to the dispute. We notice the leader is not looking at Jesus, but addressing the gathered worshipers, telling them they have six days when healing can be done, and the Sabbath isn't one of them.

In this first painting, Jesus is up front as well, but as the synagogue leader addresses the crowd, Jesus is addressing the synagogues leaders. One wonders who the crowd is watching. Jesus shames the leaders with compassion, by questioning how they can deny the wellness a daughter of Abraham, even if it is the Sabbath. Put simply, how can they say it is okay to untie a rope-bound ox, which thirsts for water without asking, but not okay to release a spirit-bound woman, who longs for healing without asking?

In this first painting, focused on the swift response of the synagogue leaders and Jesus' own rebuttal, the woman could be easily relegated to the shadows. We might easily miss her reaction to her healing. Perhaps because she utters no words, we can read right past her response. So, we realize, her healing and joy deserve a painting of its own. In a second painting, we begin to sketch the opening scene of our lesson.

After eighteen years of being bent over, I read Luke portraying the woman's amazing transformation as a single, beautiful movement: of her back being straightened while her whole body simultaneously offers worship. It could easily be painted as a dance. Let's hear it again. "Jesus laid his hands on her, [and] immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." Stooped over, touched and healed, praising and worshiping God – this second painting focuses solely on the healed woman, full of light, capturing the woman's dancing praise. We stand before it with joy, perhaps shedding a tear of delight.

A third painting emerges as we consider the meaning and impact of what Jesus has done. This painting will portray the synagogue leaders in a shameful, shadowy light. The woman, with her straightened back and worshiping heart would now be soft-lighted in the front and center. I imagine Jesus to the side, simply smiling at the woman's joy. The artist would capture the entire congregation aroused to rejoice, perhaps gently clapping as the woman moved with her newfound, unbound freedom. The dark area of this painting, where the woman once stood, is now the shadowy habitation of the shamed synagogue leaders, facing each other, probably plotting against Jesus. A dancing woman leading a rejoicing crowd; synagogue leaders huddling in shame. Dancing, with shame, in the same painting.

This third painting portrays good's triumph over evil. It is the stuff of most action movies including the adventures of Supermans, Spiderwomans, Batmans. It is the joy of classics such as the "It's a Wonderful Life." It is the words of Mary's Magnificat before Jesus' birth. It captures the theme of the weak over the strong, the poor over the rich, the landless over the propertied, the indigenous over the invader, the disenfranchised over the privileged. This third painting portrays our delight in the defeat or shame of others, particularly those so full of themselves and their self-righteousness.

The German language has a word for such delight: *schadenfreude*. I first heard the actual term on the soundtrack of the Tony award winning musical, "Avenue Q," but most of us know the feeling. ["Avenue Q – Original Broadway Cast Recording," RCA Victor – BMG compact disc 82876-55923-2RE1]

Schadenfreude: delight in the misfortune of others. It is not an endearing human trait, but one from which I suspect few of us are immune. The “Avenue Q” song gives such examples of schadenfreude as clapping when a waitress slips and drops a tray of glasses, watching a vegetarian being told she just ate a chicken, an “A” student receiving a “B”, or a CEO being shackled.

In our own ways, do we not delight when a politician we oppose trips over words, or is caught in a lie? Do not some of us delight when the highest paid baseball hitter in baseball strikes out? Do we not sometimes feel good when something goes wrong in the life of one for whom everything always seems to go so right? Do we not delight to have the synagogue leaders cast into our painting’s shameful shadows? Yes, Jesus! Put them in their place, shame them and cast them into the shadows, so we can delight and dance with the healed woman and the crowd rejoicing at all the wonderful things you are doing.

Schadenfreude: human delight in the misfortune of others, the “gotcha” feeling of triumph over our worst enemies – or, even our best friend. Best friend? Without using the term, schadenfreude, William Sloan Coffin, Jr., said that in a video series three decades ago, and it has stayed with me “that we can even delight in the misfortune of even our best friend.”

Yet, as human as it is to delight in the misfortune of the powerful, privileged and ego-filled, or simply people we don’t like, to remain in the third painting means we are satisfied with divisions and shame. Jesus will call us out of such self-satisfaction.

I believe Gospel love and divine vision call us to envision a fourth painting. I think Christ calls us beyond delight in seeing others cast into the shadows of shame. The readings invite us into a new painting of God’s truth beyond the shadows of human shame.

While Jesus’ words do shame his opponents, his purpose is to reveal God’s truth. In this story, he teaches quite clearly that temple rules are not always in synch with sovereign truths of God’s compassion and grace. In short, you heal on the Sabbath.

We fear shame and being shamed – and not just being shamed by Jesus. People in our pasts may have ingrained shame within us, and not always because of something we did or did not do. Perhaps you read this week of the abused four year old, who when asked her name by police, said her name was, “Idiot,” because that is what she had been called so often. Such shame lingers.

As happened with Jeremiah, we may so fear being shamed we resist God’s call to speak or act, offering excuses for why we cannot. For Jeremiah, he used his age. “Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.” We have a pocketful of excuses we use. The fear of shame, of being shamed, of being embarrassed, of not fitting in, of having a past wrong or current secret revealed, is very real for us.

The now dancing, healed woman would have lingered in shame’s shadows when she entered the synagogue, for her physical disability would have been linked to sinful behavior. Today, we would connect her bent over symptom with osteoporosis. But even today, one can imagine some shaking their heads and wondering why she did not take her calcium supplements. Or, we might look at her and simply be glad we are not her. Or, we might well consider whether our delight in the misfortune of others may mask a fear that we could be her at some point.

Our lessons this morning are neither about learning how to create shame, nor about a schadenfreude delight in the misfortune or embarrassment of others; both too often lead to a desire to keep those shamed in the shadows of life's paintings.

Our fourth painting highlights an inviting and expanding light shining into the deepest crevices of life's shadows, touching those shamed by an injustice done to them, and even those plotting their next steps against Jesus. The one who said, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do," calls upon us to create this new painting; indeed even to step out of the frame of the painting so the picture becomes Jesus' real life Church, from which we invite others into that inviting, expanding, penetrating light. This light offers an invitation for all to leave the shadowy refuges of the shamed, embrace and be embraced by the joy of the crowd, and join a healed woman in her praise-filled dance of life.