

## **Sermon – Proper 16 – St Luke and St Matthew, Brooklyn**

### **Women Disabled by a spirit – Luke 13:10-17**

There is an increasing body of evidence that emotions are stored in our body, rather than just in our minds. This is especially true of past emotions. One scientist calls the body our “subconscious mind” and says that unexpressed emotions get “lodged in the body.” Tension from stress and anxiety can lead to decreased blood flow in muscles, lack of oxygen, lactic acid buildup and shortening of muscle fibers leading to pain. Long term our bodies can become distorted.

Yoga, and the whole practice of physical exercise, helps us open up these tense body parts allowing us to remain bodily fit. Being bodily fit and healthy is not enough for a holistic life, we also need to be spiritually fit and mentally fit. Our lives are the trinity of body, mind and spirit. A deficiency in any one of these can lead us into difficulties in living a full life.

In the year before I was ordained, you might recall that I completed a one-year residency in pastoral care at Columbia University Medical Center and the Morgan Stanley Children’s Hospital. One of the units that I was assigned to was the rehabilitation unit. Initially I was disappointed as I really wanted to work in the critical care units like ICU and the transplant units. But God was calling me to work in this unit, amongst others. The unit was full of patients who were largely medically stabilized but required intense physical therapy to enable them to regain some function in their lives.

Through the course of the year I encountered several patients who had the diagnosis of “conversion disorder.” The first patient I encountered with this illness was a 49 yo ultra-orthodox Jewish man who was essentially paralyzed down his left side, symptoms presenting like those of a stroke patient. This patient had indeed had a stroke 5 years earlier. The patient was a referral from the attending physician who asked me to visit with him. In their work up of the man the scans and other diagnostic services had failed to show any brain mass or hemorrhage that would lead them to the conclusion that this man had a neurological condition. In fact, at the daily rounds the staff thought the man was faking his illness and they started to mock him.

I had never heard of “conversion disorder” as so I did what every good student does, I googled it. It was referred to by the Mayo Clinic as a “functional neurological symptom disorder.” In essence, psychological stress manifested itself in physical ways. The physical symptoms were real even though there was no underlying physical cause. If the symptoms were left untreated, they could become permanent. Physical symptoms showed up in movement, or in the senses such as swallowing, talking or hearing.

During my time in the hospital orthodox Jews generally would not accept pastoral care from Christians, preferring care from the staff rabbi. So, I was initially skeptical that I could help this man. To my surprise though this man was very welcoming when I explained to him that I was

there to assist him spiritually and emotionally. Over the course of an hour or more then man opened up to me about his life and his many difficulties and stresses. It was clear to me that he was having a very tough time of life and didn't know how to work through his issues. He seemed to have become paralyzed by the weight of stress in his life.

I was fascinated by his predicament. His body had become highly disabled due to the psychological stress he was experiencing. It got me to reflecting on the power of the mind and spirit over the body. Over the course of several visits with him and his son who had flown back from Israel, the patient recovered enough to be able to talk to his son about the stresses he felt in his marriage and with the family and from his business. The physical therapy team worked on his body and I was helping him work on his spirit and his emotional state.

A bodily health crisis often brings on a spiritual and / or psychological crisis. So many encounters in chaplaincy are about listening to people's deep regrets and long-held anger that bubbles to the surface when they become vulnerable due to illness. When these people are able to unburden themselves of their pain by verbally articulating what lies deep in their souls, the release I experienced in people was palpable. These deeply held emotions have in many ways disabled them from living a full life that God intended. I saw a very real transformation in people at the moment of their confession.

Transformation is the work of the Spirit of God, demonstrated for us by Jesus in today's gospel reading. In the midst of the temple, as Jesus was surrounded by men, a woman of no importance slipped quietly into the space. For years this woman had experienced the world stooped over, restricted to seeing the ground and floor rather than people's faces and the expansive sky. She came to the temple to listen and pray.

Then Jesus saw her. In the midst of his teaching he saw her slip into the temple in all of her humility. The woman came in with the spirit that disabled her we are told, which is an interesting detail, and through Jesus' healing hands she was cured and was freed from the spirit, the cause of her disability. She finally was able to lift her head and look upon people's faces and gaze into their eyes. A whole new world had opened up to her.

In our walk with God and his son Jesus Christ, we can also be burdened by these spirits, and we can become disabled by them, both spiritually and physically. The work of the church is to restore all people to unity with God, through Jesus, and that means healing of spirit. So, we gather as the body of Christ to share in this holy meal, to hear the scriptures, to be anointed, to pray and to confess those things which have held us back from a full life of faith, thus hopefully healing us.

We can though come to church for years, Sunday after Sunday and yet not be fully healed. We can carry regrets, we can carry anger, we can carry brokenness with us every day. If you are carrying these weights this morning please know that we are here for you and that as your priest, I am here to talk with you and walk with you along this journey of healing and restoration to full life.

Jesus calls us together to lay hands upon us and to heal us, not just on Sundays but every day. The leader of the synagogue chastised Jesus for healing on the Sabbath saying to the crowd that healing can happen on the other days of the week. But Jesus rebuked him calling them hypocrites for doing mundane chores on the Sabbath but not permitting the healing work of God on their sacred day. His words shamed those who chastised him into silence. But those who witnessed the healing and supported Jesus rejoiced that this woman had been freed from 18 years of suffering.

The time I spent with patients opened my eyes to the process of healing oneself by lifting the burden of carrying these deeply held emotions that disable us and prevent us from fully living as Jesus intended. If you are feeling burdened today, then we as the body of Christ will pray for you. You are invited always to come for healing prayer, either Wednesdays, the third Sunday or in private, so that you might help start down the road to being released from your suffering.

Jesus encouraged healing as an important Sabbath event. Those things that prevent you from being healed are like the Rabbi that tried to prevent Jesus from healing. Healing ourselves through Christ, so we can be restored to unity with God is the important work of the church and must never be thwarted.

Amen