

Yes, you can!

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Biblical Passage: Luke 13: 10-21 (NIV)

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman on the Sabbath

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

The Parables of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast

Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds perched in its branches."

Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough."

This is a well-known passage from scripture. Yet, as is so often the case, precisely because we know it so well, we miss the drama that is unfolding. For in this text we have, not just a miracle of healing, but the convergence of ancient and seemingly invincible powers, all coming to meet that sabbath day in that synagogue.

It was the sabbath, and a woman who had been ill for a long time, bent over, unable to stand up straight, comes into the synagogue. The text tells us that it was an evil spirit that held her down, unable to stand up straight.

It would be easy to let our attention stray and begin discussing precisely what is meant by an evil spirit. Certainly, in these supposedly enlightened days of ours we know that illness is caused by bacteria, or a virus, or some similar origin. And with that explanation we are satisfied, as if we had really solved and eliminated the demonic nature of illness and suffering. The woman is bent over. She cannot stand up straight. That this may be due to a virus, a bacterium, a fracture, or anything else is quite secondary. The fact is that she is bent over, oppressed, crushed, suffering. And that is demonic.

With that woman there comes into the synagogue what we religious folk often try to forget: the reality of the power of evil; the reality of human suffering.

It was the sabbath. A day devoted to rest since the ancient times of Hebrew tradition. So ancient, that the sabbath was connected with the very act of creation, “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. You shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, you male or female slave, your livestock, or the resident alien in your town. For in Six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all

that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.”

It was the sabbath. A day devoted to rest by none Other than the very Creator God. A wise instruction from a creator who knows that this human creature cannot work, and work, and work, without rest. But a day of rest which humans, by dint of ever more meticulous legislation, had belabored into a day of greater difficulties. Instead of simply rejoicing in God's creation, and truly resting, sincere religious people had turned to the most detailed discussions as to what could be done on the day of rest. The law says that on the sabbath we shall not work. Is it then legal to draw water from a well in order to drink? The land is not to be plowed on the day of rest. Is it then legal to move a piece of furniture which may make a burrow on the dirt? The law says that even animals are to rest on the sabbath. Is it then legal to get an egg laid by a hen on that holy day? And thus, the day of rest had become a day of greater entanglements and difficulties.

It was the sabbath. In the synagogue. Precisely where the laws referring to the sabbath were studied, analyzed, and exaggerated.

It was the sabbath. In the synagogue. And in comes the woman bent over, oppressed, crushed by the power of Satan. It was the sabbath, and there in the synagogue was also Jesus, Lord of creation, and Lord of the sabbath. What will he do? On the one hand, in that woman's

suffering Satan himself confronts him. On the other hand, in the entire atmosphere around him, in the very law of Israel, in the leader of the synagogue, the weight of tradition seems to say that there is nothing to be done.

Now on the sabbath, in the synagogue, Jesus faces the bent over woman, oppressed by the weight of Satan himself. And to her oppression of eighteen years the religious leaders would add another of umpteen centuries: It is the sabbath! It is a day for religious matters! Heal the woman? No, you can't!

But Jesus saw the woman, and he called her, and he spoke to her, and he laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight, and began praising God.

Ah, but the leader of the synagogue was a religious man who knew the law. No, you can't. Go home! "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days to be cured and not on the sabbath day."

But Jesus takes him to task, as well as others like him: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath day untie your ox or donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water? And can one not free this woman from this bondage on the sabbath day? Yes, you can." If it was your brother or your mother on the other side of the border trying to seek work and a better life, would you tell them that it is not legal?

As a result of the miracle, and of this discussion with the leader of the synagogue, the entire crowd rejoices and praises Jesus for the great marvels he performs.

But Jesus, instead of speaking about the great and marvelous, speaks about the small: about a mustard seed that someone planted, and a bit of leaven that a woman put into a mass flour. The kingdom of God, Jesus tells them, is precisely like the mustard seed hidden underground, or like a bit of yeast hidden in the bowl of flour. God is not like the powerful of the earth, who must do everything with might and noise. God is like a woman who quietly puts a bit of yeast in the dough or like a man who plants a tiny mustard seed.

Why does Jesus tell these parables? Because there, in that synagogue, it has been shown that although sometimes it works quietly, God's power is greater than that of the most ancient traditions and that of the most powerful demons. Remember that the one who is speaking has not only shown the leader of the synagogue that Yes, you can heal on the sabbath, but was also born a poor and small mustard seed in a humble manger, that as a child he had to go into exile in Egypt, and that finally had to face the most formidable powers of evil. And, when evil had finally triumphed with the cruel death on a cross, God shouted the greatest "Yes, you can" —¡Sí se puede!—of all the ages, raising him from among the dead.

That is why today, like that small mustard seed, we dare say, "Yes, you can." Not because we are brave, nor because we are strong, but because God raised Jesus Christ from among the

dead. That is why, in the face of all the powers of evil, in the face of all the powers of oppression, in the darkest of circumstances, in life and in death, we dare say, “¡Sí, se puede!”—Yes, we can.

Years have gone by, and the confrontation that took place in the synagogue still takes place today, perhaps no longer in the synagogue, but now in society at large and even in the Christian. As we look around ourselves, we see a people bent over by the evil spirit of injustice, poverty and racism.

There are many reasons why this is so, and we could spend the entire evening debating them. But the fact of the matter is that Latinos and Latinas, as well as other minorities, are a bent-over people, a people who have not been allowed to stand up straight, not just for eighteen years, but for centuries. A people that now comes into the church, just as that woman came to the synagogue.

And as I think about these things, I wonder also what would be the glory and the shape of the United Methodist Church if faced by the evils let loose upon our society, we were to stretch our hands and with mighty cry of “In the name of God, Yes, you can!” we were to call those who are bent over to stand up straight.

It will require drastic changes in the way we manage our resources, in the way we handle our finances, in the way we organize our lives. Today, as in that synagogue, there will be those who will say that it cannot be done, or it should not be done. It is the sabbath, and healing is not permitted. And some will say, "The budget does not suffice," or "the Discipline does not allow it." To those I suspect Jesus would say, "If your ox were thirsty on the sabbath day, would you not untie it and take it to water? If the Discipline or the budget were to impede the life of your larger and richest churches, which among you would not be ready to change the Discipline and the budget? Yes you can."

But there is another angle to this story. No matter what the leader of the synagogue does, the woman will be healed. We may be faithful or not, but God's purposes will be fulfilled. Peace, and love, and justice will overcome, for the Lord of ages has declared it.

The question is not, will it happen? The question is rather, as it happens, will we be found on the side of the Lord who extended his hand and made the woman stand up straight, or on the side of the leader of the synagogue who despite all his religiosity, took the side of the power of evil that held the woman in bondage?

It may be difficult to opt for the mustard seed hidden underground, or for the bit of yeast in the bowl of flour. But the seed is there, and the yeast is there, working its way through, and proclaiming against all the loud powers of evil and oppression: Yes, you can!