

The Trouble with Loosed Women  
Sermon on Luke 13:10-17 Preached at Highland Park UMC  
Sunday, August 26, 2007

If you have read any of our communication lately, you realize that we are not terribly bothered about correct spelling any longer. As you already know, I blame text-messaging and e-mail for this crime against the English language. Misspellings abound: you find them in advertisements, newsletters, and I regret very much to say, books. Not even church bulletins are immune from careless spelling errors, mistakes that often have humorous and quite unintended results. Many of you will have seen some of these, but it is helpful to be reminded to do your own spell-check. Women of this Lutheran church, for instance, would understandably be offended to learn from their bulletin that “The men’s group will meet at 6 p.m. Steak, mashed potatoes, green beans, bread and dessert will be served for a nominal fee.” Taking a dose of Pepto-Bismol seems appropriate for those church-goers who would “Attend and you will hear an excellent speaker and have a healthy lunch.” Those who didn’t take the pink stuff before lunch would be relieved to go to the “Potluck supper Sunday at 5:00 pm [with] prayer and medication to follow.” And I really hope that the following announcement did not appear in the bulletin of a United Methodist Church: “This evening at 7 p.m. there will be a hymn sing in the park across from the Church. Bring a blanket and come prepared to sin.”

So as to avoid any suggestion that we are *that* kind of church, I have very carefully worded the title of this sermon. Those of you who have come this morning hoping for a treatise on sexual mores are likely to be disappointed. My beliefs on this subject are decidedly biblical, and thus from the standpoint of today’s “enlightened”—read permissive—sexual politics, quite old-fashioned, if not outright prudish. But you’ll not get from me any admonitions to avoid the allure of debauched, wanton, loose women. I want to talk about the trouble with loosed women.

You know the ones I have in mind: Women whose lives have been changed by an encounter with Jesus. Liberated women who have been set free by Jesus' word and action. And as we all know, liberated women are dangerous women. That's why the synagogue leader, who clearly was not a card-carrying member of the National Organization for Women, is upset with Jesus. To all who would listen the man argued that "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day" (Lk. 13:14). The man has a point: No less a statute than the fourth commandment says, "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. For 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," and neither shall anyone else in your household (Exod. 20:8-11). The law was clear, and rules are rules, and there was even a really good reason behind this particular one. Work was forbidden on the sabbath because that day was a day of rest, just as God had intended it to be and had practiced it himself.

Now, however, if people generally, and women in particular, start getting healed on the sabbath, who knows what might happen? The house and the dishes might not get cleaned. Dinner might be late. Women might begin voting or working or realizing that, like men, they are made in the image of God—made to be creative, intelligent, responsible people. Stereotypes might crumble. Old habits might get broken. Glass ceilings might get shattered. "We've got trouble my friends," said the synagogue leader. "Trouble right here in River City. We're in terrible, terrible trouble. It's the trouble with loosed women."

If you've ever taken Latin, chances are the first verb you learned to conjugate was *amo*, 'I love.' *Amo*, I love; *amas*, you love; *amat*, he/she/it loves; *amamus*, we love; *amatis*, you (plural) love; *amant*, they love. And when I learned Greek, the first verb we learned to conjugate was *luo*, to loose, release, set free: *luō*, I loose; *lueis*, you loose; *luei*, he/she/it looses; *luomen*, we

loose; *luete*, you (plural) loose; *luousi*, they loose. Some form of the verb *luo* occurs three times in this passage, telling us just how important an idea this is. Now I'm not typically a big fan of the King James Version of the Bible, because most of us—myself included—no longer speak the English language as it was spoken in the 17<sup>th</sup>-century. But here the “King Jimmy” as my beloved Greek professor affectionately termed it, gets it right. Speaking in verse 16, Jesus says, “Woman, thou art loosed from thine infirmity,” and from there Bishop T. D. Jakes has gone on to write a best-selling book.

Woman, thou art loosed. For this woman, these words are a declaration of independence, an emancipation proclamation. For eighteen long years, this woman had suffered the cruel and crippling effects of a spirit of weakness or a spirit of infirmity. Some commentators speculate that the woman suffered curvature of the spine, or a fusion of the spinal joints, or osteoporosis—a weakening of the bones. The terms Luke uses to describe the woman's condition do not permit a clear diagnosis, but we don't have to make up one. Jesus makes clear the nature of the problem: The woman has been bound by Satan, so she is under the influence of an evil spirit. This unclean spirit laid so heavy a burden on this unfortunate woman that she was literally “bent over and quite unable to stand up straight” (Lk. 13:11).

For eighteen long years—perhaps as much as half of her adult life, given the short life expectancy of that day<sup>1</sup>—this woman had been unable to lift her head or straighten her back. As such, she was a “captive to restricted movement, to the inability to meet another person face-to-face, and to a world defined by the piece of ground around her toes or looked at always on a slant.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, we want to know how this woman ended up in such a pitiful condition. The culture of her day assumed the woman must have sinned, her deformity a just punishment.

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon Ringe, 187.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Jesus, however, exhibits no such curiosity, nor does he arrive at a similar conclusion. Jesus does not see a sinner, and neither does he see a sin-caused deformity. He sees instead a “daughter of Abraham” (13:16), a child of God trapped, imprisoned, bound by Satan in the confinement of her own disfigured body. As a daughter of Abraham, she, too, is a child of the promises God made to Abraham, promises that are coming true in Jesus Christ. She is the child of the promise sung by Mary that “[God’s] mercy is for those who fear him” and that “He has helped his servant Israel, ... according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his descendants forever” (1:50a, 54a, 55). She is the child of the promise celebrated by Zechariah that God “has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, ... the oath that he wore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him” (1:72a, 73-74). She is the child of the promise announced and enacted by Jesus that with the anointing of the Holy Spirit, God had sent him “to proclaim release to the captives and ... to let the oppressed go free” (4:18). For eighteen years this daughter of Abraham had been held in bondage, and the time had come to set her free. Jesus spoke the word, Woman, thou art loosed, and she was released from her contorted confinement. “Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God” (13:13b).

That’s the trouble with loosed women, indeed the trouble with all people—women and men, old and young, red and brown and black and white, disabled or able-bodied—when Jesus speaks God’s word of power and authority, God’s word of freedom and release into our lives. When Jesus speaks, we are liberated from all that has bound, confined, imprisoned, and disfigured us, bending our lives out of shape. When Jesus touches us, our souls and bodies so disfigured by sin, are healed and refashioned in the image of their Creator. Jesus speaks to us and touches us and redeems us from our bondage and sets us free: free to worship, free to serve,

free to love, free to follow. And we shall not be the same again. Friends, in the name of Jesus Christ you are loosed! Go forth to worship, to serve, and to love.