

Proper 16, Year C – August 24, 2025

“Gifts for God’s people”

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ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

VERGENNES, VERMONT

Isaiah 58: 9b-14 | Psalm 103:1-8 | Hebrews 12:18-29 | Luke 13:10-17

A soft-spoken man named Paul approached me at our cotton candy stand at Vergennes Day yesterday and asked if I go to church here. I told him I was the priest, and he asked a series of questions, observations, and comparisons—starting with Catholic Church’s belief in communion as consuming the actual Body and Blood of Christ, which is different from his church’s way of thinking of communion as a remembrance of Jesus’ life. He quoted the Bible several times, like John 3:3 (“Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God”) and asked me about being born again, and what about salvation? What about salvation? That’s not an easy question to answer while you’re making cotton candy in high winds!

I shared some thoughts with him—that one way to be born again is to accept that our loving God created us and that we are good. When we can accept that truth about ourselves, our lives are transformed, then we can love and serve others freely. When we live this way, we are saved in this life and the next.

Jesus’ life work was all about saving, healing, and making people whole again. He healed people’s minds, bodies, and spirits. In today’s healing story from Luke Ch. 13, Jesus saw a woman who was bent over. He called to her and set her free from her ailment. For eighteen years, this unnamed woman could only see her feet and the next step in front of her. She had to strain to see the sun, the sky, the stars. Isn’t this a good way to describe how

we exist most of the time? We are bent down, focused intently on where we are standing or the next step in front of us. Our burdens and narrow perspective keep us from standing in awe of God's creation and praising God.

The woman in today's Gospel did not ask Jesus to heal her, like the man with leprosy earlier in Luke. The authors don't give any indication of why that might be. She might have been afraid to ask, or feel unworthy, or because suffering has caused her perspective to shrink, she might not perceive Jesus' authority to heal. The unnamed woman in this story might be like Peter's mother-in-law whom Jesus healed from a fever (Luke 4), who had to use all of her strength to live. After Jesus healed her, the woman no longer had to strain to look up. She didn't have to turn her body from side to side to see what everyone around her could see with a turn of the head and a glance. When Jesus laid his hands on her, she stood up straight immediately and began praising God.

I imagine her prayer sounded something like today's psalm, the 103rd, which many of us remember as one of the songs in Godspell.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.

He forgives all our sins and heals all our infirmities;

He redeems our life from the grave and crowns us with mercy and loving-kindness;

He satisfies us with good things, and our youth is renewed like an eagle's.

The Lord executes righteousness and judgment for all who are oppressed.

He made his ways known to Moses and his works to the children of Israel.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.

Jesus' healing ministry offered glimpses into the kingdom of God, when there will be no sickness. God *commands* his followers to serve others, then *empowers* them (us!) to do so. Jesus empowered his followers to heal people (Luke 9). All healings are fueled by God's power. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann wrote that: "Jesus' healings are not supernatural miracles in a natural world. They are the only truly 'natural' thing in a world that is unnatural, demonized, and wounded." They are a sign that God is putting the world back on the right path.

The keepers of order in the religious community, the synagogue leaders, accused Jesus of violating Sabbath law, but Jesus challenged this way of living. You hypocrites, Jesus said. Even you take your livestock from the manger to water. If you help your animals drink, then how much more should a descendant of Abraham be freed? She is one of God's children already, an heir to the covenant of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. Remember that God promised Abraham that he would give him and Sarah descendants--as many as there are stars in the sky. The unnamed woman was one of those stars.

The religious leaders had lost sight of the purpose of the law, which was to teach community members how to live with each other and to organize their lives so they may grow and thrive. To allow suffering to continue is against the spirit of God's law. The purpose of the law—and religion in general—is to free people from the things that rob them

of living a full life and to watch them rejoice in that freedom. God gave the Israelites the law not to help them *become* God's people, but as a gift, because they *are* God's people. The work of healing continues, performed every day by doctors, nurses, lab techs, administrators, hospital custodians and parking lot attendants, and countless others whose work makes healing possible. We lift up in the light of God's love all of those who serve and served in these professions, giving special thanks for those who heal our loved ones and bring them back to us safely.

Let us pray,

Almighty God,

Soften our hearts to your call more each day. Help us to grow in your wisdom and to adopt your perspective.

We turn our worries, comparisons, jealousy, anger, bitterness, and envy over to you now and ask for a fresh vision of your will for our lives.

We struggle to live day to day. We want to know how the story ends, and whether we will achieve our goals.

Increase our trust in you to lead us each day, giving us what we need to be prepared to love the other people you have placed in our lives.

Help us to hear your voice above all others, God.

Let your will guide our lives, today and always. In Jesus' name, Amen.

