

Keeping Our Priorities Straight

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON LUKE 13:10-17

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WHAT IS THIS LIFE," poet William Davies wondered, "if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare."¹ How different life can seem when you take time to stand and stare, when you stand still long enough for the mud to settle and the water to clear. Vision distills; priorities clarify.

"Be still," – the psalmist records the invitation – "and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth" (Ps. 46:10). Be still, and know that God is first in priority, higher than all the petty tasks that fill our to-do lists; higher than the lifestyles, possessions, and activities that so often we allow to identify us; higher than creed or class, race or nation. God alone is first; everything else is secondary.

What is the greatest rule for living, a lawyer wanted to know? Love God with everything you have and everything you are, Jesus said, and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:28-31). There is our first priority; everything else we think God requires of us takes a back seat. It sounds good in theory. How does it look in practice? Well, it looks something like today's story about Jesus' encounter with two people in a synagogue.

One of them was crippled by a spirit that left her "bent over and quite unable to stand up straight." (v. 11) The other stood straight as a pillar, as straight as the pillar of society that he was. But he too was crippled, unable to respond freely to the life that was opening up right before his eyes.

One was a "daughter of Abraham," one of God's own. For a long time something prevented her from reaching her full potential. Luke says only that she was afflicted with literally "a spirit of weakness," which someone described as "the power that holds her 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 own toes or looked at always on a slant."

We know people like that who for good reason cannot move freely in life. Maybe they have been left with a spirit of weakness by great loss or great suffering, the death or alienation of someone very close, the burden of poor health or unrelieved financial difficulties, or some other affliction. Maybe they are unable to move freely in life because for reasons all their own they've accepted imagined limitations, drawn their horizon too close and are afraid to risk venturing beyond it. Maybe they are unable to

meet others face-to-face because of poor self-image, ingrained during childhood and youth, and so always look at the world and life "on a slant." A spirit of weakness cripples many.

The other one whom Jesus met that day – we know people like him, too – was a respected leader in his community, an exemplar of integrity and faithfulness. Nothing in his response to Jesus was mean-spirited. He wanted only to be obedient to God's will as he understood it, as much as Jesus wanted to. The woman's condition was not life threatening. Surely, her healing could have waited another day, until Sabbath was over.

As sincere as he was, he also was crippled, a victim of the all-too-human tendency to let systems and institutions and tradition become more important than people. He let the need to be consistent and predictable preempt the opportunity to be spontaneous and creative. He let the service of tradition take priority over open responsiveness to human need. He was exactly right about what God had said and dead wrong about what God was saying in that moment. He had lost a proper sense of priorities.

Last weekend four of our neighbors were killed and four others injured in the worst incidence of focused violence Buffalo has known in many years. A "wake-up call" is what developer Rocco Termini called it, a call to come to our senses and get our priorities straight. It might be comforting to think of it as a city problem, if you are comfortable in such illusions. But the shooting could have happened anywhere gang members run into each other: a mall, movie theater, popular night spot, or an intersection.

Donn Esmond observed last week that few of us "want to talk about bigger answers" to the problem of violence, and one of the bigger issues that needs an answer is that parts of the city have become "largely a warehouse for the region's poor." By the way we have developed the region and tried to insulate ourselves from the city, we have created wards for housing those who are crippled by "a crushing concentration of few jobs, little money, busted families and drug-fueled violence."²

Around here, there is a lot of talk about rehabilitating this old building to better serve the next generation of the faithful. We could spend a lot of energy and money doing that, and a good case can be made for the project. Jesus' encounter with those two people in the synagogue makes me wonder if we might spend as much energy and money toward rehabilitating the community in which we live, standing upright those whom we have crippled with the lifestyle we enjoy.

It is a matter of clarifying priorities and keeping them straight, first things first, loving God *and* neighbor before everything else. We cannot keep running full-tilt on the path we are on and hope to see our way clearly. We have to stop and look carefully if we are to see the goal we are after, if we are to gain the wealth of life God offers. "A poor life this if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare."³

NOTES: • 1. William Henry Davies (1871-1940), "Leisure." • 2. Donn Esmond, "Downtown has to fight for its life," *The Buffalo News*, 18 August 2010. • 3. Davies, "Leisure."