

Fourteen Sunday after Pentecost
Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Saint Francisville. LA

21 August 2016

Luke 13:10-17

I have thought a great deal about a character in one of Victor Hugo's books this week. In developing Quasimodo, the Hunchback of Notre Dame, the author uses a writing device that allows the reader to see the basic decency and humanity of Quasimodo, while the crowd sees only a monstrous freak. This week I saw 2,000 people seating on cots, holding on to whatever little they could rescue from the floods. And many, only saw victims, poor dispossessed people, human tragedy. Yet, there was another reality you could miss if you were not looking carefully. In the Hunchback of Notre Dame the reader is challenged to see Quasimodo's humanity, his decency, his loyalty, and his great courage. Only the reader is given the opportunity to see Quasimodo's full humanity and by the end of the book, every reader finds himself or herself rooting for Quasimodo, hoping that things will turn out OK for him, and relating to him in a way they were unable to relate before. The message of the book is simple: Beauty, honesty, and goodness transcends physical appearance and, even, tragedy. But there is another message here: the only way to discover someone's full humanity is by entering their story! You can not look from a distance and pretend you know the full complexity of a person's tragedy or story. Jesus today gives an example of how we can enter another person's story.

The story of the Gospel today, which is only found in the gospel of Luke, tells us a few things about Jesus. **First, it tells us that Jesus saw her.** This was a woman others avoided. She was "bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight". By the standards of the day, the woman must have been quite a sinner, for physical ailments were considered a punishment from God for sin. She is a faceless person others avoid. She is described as having a debilitating spirit. She is not given a name. There are no details given about who she was, or who she had been before the osteoporosis, (or the illness that caused the condition.) She is a nobody. Yet, Jesus sees her. He focuses his attention on her, while others are trying hard to avoid her.

Then the passage tells us that **Jesus spoke to her**, "He called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment'." The word here is not "cure" but "liberated, released, set free, untied from bonds, etc." Jesus more than cures the woman. He liberated her from any physical, spiritual, or emotional conditions that held her hostage, that kept her bound, that deprived her of her full identity and her full humanity. We see this because later in the story Jesus calls this woman, "A daughter of Abraham". After he sets her free, she is no longer a faceless someone in the crowd, she is an Israelite, a daughter of Abraham, someone deserving the same promises made by God to all the descendants of Abraham.

Perhaps the most remarkable is what Jesus does next, "When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." **Jesus touched her.** Not only does he see her and speak to her, he also offers her his healing touch. Now, this is remarkable. He defiled himself on the Sabbath by touching someone deemed to be impure, and by doing so, he risks angering the authorities of the day. He performs a "work" on a sacred day, where no work was allowed, and this brings him conflict with the synagogue leader. This brings to mind last week's Gospel passage when he said, "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Luke 12:49-56). By healing this woman, he is in fact purposely challenging the powers of the day. Luke tells us that, "The leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which

work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day'." The leader of the synagogue has a zero tolerance for any violations of the Sabbath Laws. The Sabbath is a day for rest and for worship, no exceptions!

He reminds me of the story of Patrick Timoney this last February. Patrick, a Fourth Grader at PS52 in Staten Island, New York, was sent to the Principal's office because he and a friend were playing with Lego soldiers at lunch time. Patrick's favorite Lego was a military character only 1.5 inches in height. The tiny action soldier came armed with a submachine gun only about 2 inches in length. The school principal felt that the tiny two-inch plastic gun violated the Zero Tolerance for guns policy of the school. Patrick was taken to the Principal's office who then proceeded to call the boy's mother at work to announce that a disciplinary hearing had been scheduled and that the boy faced the possibility of suspension. Of course, the media got hold of the story and the suspension never took place. In a way, I understand the Principal's concerns. Anyone who has children knows that those little Legos are dangerous killers. They hide behind sofa cushions waiting for us to seat down, so they can poke us or pinch us. They place themselves at the entrance of bathrooms and dark rooms, waiting for us to step on them when we wake up in the middle of the night. They kill our dishwashers, washing machines and our vacuum cleaners. And they are often used by children as weapons against siblings. That Principle was right in declaring a zero tolerance against Legos. And zero means zero!

The leader of the synagogue also has a zero tolerance, but in his case it is a zero tolerance to Sabbath breakers. Now, he might be surprised by Jesus' behavior, but we shouldn't be. After all, Jesus has done this behavior several other times in Luke. In chapter 4:31-37 he healed a man with an unclean spirit during the Sabbath, on 6:6-11 he heals a man with a withered hand also on the Sabbath, of course we have the episode today, and then on 14:1-6 he will heal a man with dropsy also on the Sabbath. Jesus is a repeat offender! And he seems to be doing this somewhat purposely. If this woman had been sick for 18 years, why couldn't Jesus wait just a few more hours and heal her the next day? Why purposely offend the authorities? The answer is very simple. For Jesus religion was made as a tool for man and not the other way around. God did not say in Genesis, "Let us create a Religion, and then let us create men and women to obey that Religion". Religion was created so that men and women may find appropriate ways to worship the Lord, their God. But humanity comes before even the mandates and rules of religion. Jesus says it well, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath care for your animals? And Shouldn't this daughter of Abraham be more important than your animals?" (My paraphrase).

Organized religions often focus more on the external rituals of the faith than they do on the people seating on the pews. But Christ, sees beyond the exterior facades of rituals, and willingly enters the story of humanity. Christ sees us and is not appalled by our sin. Christ calls us to himself and speaks to us silently in our prayer life, through Holy Scripture, and through others we encounter every day. Christ is always willing to liberate us from anything that binds us, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual if we give him the opportunity. For Christ humanity is more important than ritual. When Jesus looks at this broken, bent-over woman he sees beyond her physical appearance to her humanity. Christ acts to restore that humanity by liberating the woman from anything that kept her bound, including her physical illness. This is great news for me and it should be for you all because, my friends, we are all Quasimodo. Perhaps not in a physical sense, but many of us still carry the humps of resentment and anger, the scars of betrayal and loss, the deformities of guilt and shame, the impediments of social isolation, loneliness, addiction, and depression. We are Quasimodo! And the good news is that Christ sees us and is not appalled by our sin and our deformities. The good news is that Christ speaks to us constantly, directly addressing us in our prayer life, through Scripture and through the intervention of others. The Good news is that he offers us his healing touch every day. He seeks to restore and to liberate us. I invite all of you today to place your life in his hands. Christ loves you and seeks to make you whole. Amen!