

Sermon – Luke 13:10-17
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“Miriam, Maybe”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. For eighteen years this unnamed woman was crippled, bent over, unable to stand up straight. Of course, she wasn't without a name. We just don't know what it was. I like to think her name was Miriam. I'll tell you why later. “How long, O Lord?” she must have thought. “How long, O Lord?”, she must have prayed. It feels like suffering can last for so long. Evil, it seems, can last forever. When will it end? When will it all get straightened out? Eighteen years of unending pain and illness. Would it ever end? It would. When? When Jesus showed up. Our world has no end of evil, no shortage of suffering. So what do we do, people of God? We wait for the Jesus who has already shown up and respond as if he's already here. Because he is.
2. This past week I had the blessing of being in Poland with 38 other Jewish and Christian leaders. We made pilgrimage to places with names like Treblinka and Auschwitz, places where the Nazis sought to bring to enact their Final Solution to end the Jewish race. Along the way, incredible evil, incredible suffering, was inflicted upon Jews and many other people. For five days, we stared into the void of that evil. During this same week, on August 20, we also remembered that it was 400 years ago that kidnapped Africans were first brought to what would later become the United States and sold as chattel. Governor Yeardley of Virginia acquired more than twenty slaves in exchange for victuals, food for the ship's crew traded for human beings. To be sure, there is debate as to whether or not the 1619 date is the best marker but

really that's beside the current point. At least 400 years ago, the colonies that would become our nation began importing other human beings as property. It is an anniversary that bids us to stare into the void of evil. Looking there, people of God, what do we do? How do we respond?

3. As human beings, there are only three things we can do, three ways we can respond after we stare into the void of human suffering and human evil. We can look and despair. We can say we don't care. Or we can be moved to move the world into a new place from there. As people of faith, the last option is the only one that's viable. We wait for Jesus to show up, knowing that he already has. And we act like he's here, because he already is.

4. For eighteen years this unnamed woman was crippled, bent over, could not stand up straight. And then Jesus shows up, crossing calcified boundaries to heal the woman who, once set free, begins to praise God. The synagogue leader becomes indignant however, seeing Jesus' healing as a violation of Sabbath. Of course, it wasn't. Jesus sees the hypocrisy immediately. Sabbath does not mean doing nothing; it means focusing on God and the life God gives. So, if there's nothing wrong with leading a donkey to water, why should there be anything wrong with leading a woman to health after eighteen years of suffering? The leader of our trip this past week, Rabbi Yehiel Poupko, shared a story from early in his career. He was listening to two learned rabbis attempt to answer the question as to when it was allowed to call the doctor to visit a sick child on the Sabbath. They debated this temperature of fever versus that temperature, the amount of pain and discomfort involved, the nature of the medical condition, on and on. Finally, the person who first asked the question turned to Rabbi Poupko and asked, "And what do you say?" To which he replied, "You call the doctor when the child's mother says it's time to call the doctor." Sabbath, you see, is not an arbitrary set of laws to be debated and enforced. Jesus knows this and reminds his people that when a person is in need, the best way to keep

Sabbath, to honor God and the life God gives, is to break through barriers and bring healing.

5. The wait for deliverance, for healing, for life, can seem unbearable. So much so that when it happens, the only thing to do in response is to *live*. As we walked through Auschwitz this week – a place whose name has rightly become synonymous with evil – we met a man named Mordechai. He was visiting with two of his grandsons. Mordechai brought them to the concentration camp so that they could see the place where their great-grandparents had met. Against oppressive odds, two young people named Ieshula and Miriam survived the camp and met there shortly after it was liberated in January 1945. Ieshula was ill, and Miriam’s friends urged her to leave with them now that they were free. But Miriam had taken a shine to Ieshula, Mordechai told us, love blossoming like a flower in the midst of death. She stayed, nursing him back to health. Within six months they were married; within a few years they had four children. Today the descendants of Ieshula and Miriam number 91. Look to the heavens and count the stars, we hear echoing from the scriptures; so shall your descendants be. When healing and deliverance come, when life is restored, you praise God the way Ieshula and Miriam did: by living, and by doing so joyfully. You live like another Miriam, who took up the tambourine on the far side of the Red Sea and praised God with song for the gift of deliverance. You live like Mary – whose name, of course, is Miriam – who when learning she would give birth to Jesus burst forth in a song that proclaimed the upside-downing of the world, with the mighty cast down and the rich sent away.
6. So perhaps, just perhaps, this unnamed woman’s name was Miriam. She did have a name. I don’t know that it was Miriam, but you can’t prove that it wasn’t! Miriam, whose people were slaves in Egypt for 400 years, who once she was free sang praises to God. Mary, whose people suffered under Roman occupation, who once she was blessed sang a song of joy that magnified the

Lord. Miriam, who lived through the hell of the Holocaust, who when liberation came responded by singing the song that is simply choosing to live, and to do so with love. Miriam, perhaps, who was crippled for eighteen years, who when healed began to praise God.

7. The songs and praises of these Miriams call us forth to life and to love. Yes, the void created by evil would have us despair, or at least ignore it so long as it's not directly affecting us. But that is not the response for people of faith. As Christians we know in faith that Jesus has come to bring life; to heal across boundaries and finally to cross the great boundary of death and show it forth as the no-longer-powerful force, the empty shell, that it is. For Christ has died, and Christ has risen. We live in the graceful power of that truth, knowing both that he shall return one day to put everything back to rights *and* that he is with us always, even now, until the end of the age. In his presence, with his love, we live resurrection lives. We live lives that are songs of praise to God, lives that are worthy of the memory of those who suffered evil. We remember the past, and trust in the future, working to make a better present in this world. And so we live lives that push back against ongoing racism and antisemitism. We live lives that work to make America an America that works for people of all colors; we work to make Israel and Palestine a land that works for people of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds. We don't do nothing, for in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetuate it." Simply put, we live refusing to believe that evil wins, even when it feels like it will. Because it won't. Yes, the wait can be long. Eighteen years. 400 years. Endless years, it seems. But we do not despair, and we do not ignore, for love and life have triumphed in Jesus Christ. Boundaries have fallen. In hope, let us keep faith with the Jesus who is always with us. Let us sing the songs of these women, these Miriams, songs that point to the end of oppression, to the liberation of all captives, and to the simple call to live with love. So come to the feast of Jesus' body and blood, stay for the picnic of

fellowship and food. And then go, fed, to live and to love beyond barriers. For it is in so doing that we give praise, thanks, and honor to God for all that God has done for us in Christ. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.