



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, August 25, 2013
The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
Isaiah 58:9b-14 and Luke 10:38-42
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NOW IS THE TIME

The prophet Isaiah counsels that if the people of Israel would put off the yolk that was about their neck, the Lord would bless them. (Isaiah 58.9ff)

One day Jesus was teaching in a synagogue when he spied a woman stooped over. A variety of diseases or conditions might cause someone to be in such a state: osteoporosis, scoliosis, spinal injury, poor posture. Not so with the woman in the synagogue. Her ailment is spiritual, not physiological and it has plagued her for eighteen years. She is described as a woman and not a girl so one can suppose that at some point in her life she knew what it was to look up and to stand upright. But things changed and over time the devil, we are told, stooped her over and she could in no wise lift up herself.

But then there is Jesus teaching in her synagogue when he spots this woman, calls her to himself, lays hands upon her and says, "Woman, thou art loosed from thy infirmity." Immediately she stood upright and glorified God.

And wouldn't you know it; this is when the trouble begins. This miracle prompted yet another spat in an ongoing controversy about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, which day it was when this healing took place. The leader of the synagogue, the spiritual leader of this woman's place of worship, the parish priest of her church we might say, confronts Jesus. Oh, wait, no he doesn't. He doesn't confront Jesus face to face. That would be to have a direct and honest confrontation with the parties involved. No, he goes to the crowd self-righteous and indignant and triangulates with them. He's a cowardly pot-stirrer and he begins sowing seeds of discord? Passive-aggressive: might that be the word for it?

In any case, this priest goes to the crowd, complains about Jesus healing on the Sabbath, and tells his flock, there are six days in which men ought to work. If, I say, *if* you have a problem, you come back to be healed on one of those days, not on this day.

The Lord speaking directly to this priest, and not through the crowd, calls him a hypocrite. Jesus has answered this charge before in sundry places and has said to his opponents: "You know the law says that if your ox or your ass needs a drink of water on the Sabbath that it is ok for you to untie them and lead them to water. You know that if your ox or your ass wanders away and is lost, you may go seek after it and lead it back home. You know that if your ox or your ass stumbles and falls, you may lift it upright. Yet, you hirelings, when these your sheep that are thirsty for living water, wandering lost, fallen and can in no wise lift up themselves, you tell them that this is not a day for their healing. Man, what is the Sabbath but a day of liberation from the burdens of this life of work and worry. A day set

apart for deliverance. So, if you leaders, rabbis, priests will free your ass on the Sabbath, why won't you free your flock as well? And when Jesus had said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame.

His adversaries were shamed, the people, on the other hand, rejoiced at the things that Jesus was saying and doing.

So, in the face of a spiritual ailment presented in the gospel, I will ask you a spiritual question: can you show me here even one person who is not burdened by some sin or other? Is it you? Is it me? Now, I have met people who are completely oblivious to their sinfulness and I have known people completely aware and just unconcerned. At our house, we have a little magnet on our refrigerator: it says, sometimes I wrestle with my demons and sometimes we just snuggle. I've met people who have *that* kind of relationship with sin, but not one of those kinds of relationships with sin is the same as being liberated from it. St. Jerome said that a soul is rarely discovered who does not have this extremely heavy collar around its neck, oppressing it with such terrestrial work that it cannot gaze at heaven at all, but only the earth. Doesn't that describe the condition of mankind beset by sin? The woman in the synagogue is but an extreme example of sin's crippling effect. But our sins cripple all of us, no matter how upright we may appear outwardly, and we can in no wise lift up ourselves.

And here I might be tempted to be self-conscious about speaking too directly about sin. Isn't that one of the oldest charges against the church, its clergy are all the time going on and on about sin: sin and Jesus, sin and Jesus. But, the thing is, sin is *the* problem and Jesus is *the* remedy. What more can the church say?

And, as one kind of leader of the synagogue, what should I say to you about sin to make things better for you? Should I try to convince you that sin is not crippling? Would you be comforted if I told you that sin is not all that unacceptable? Should I minimize sin suggesting it will all be ok? Should I tell you to come back tomorrow, well not tomorrow that's my day off, but some other day; we'll deal with it later? Or eh, if you're going to sin, do it boldly so that grace might abound. Believe me, that has been suggested. (Romans 6.1) In fact, why should you bother with what I might or might not say to you? The leader in the synagogue from the gospel shows that poor spiritual counsel is always near at hand in the church.

But here is something that I hope you will not ignore. What does Jesus have to say about the collar that is around our necks? Suppose that Jesus were here teaching in our church today: what would he tell you? Would he tell you that sin is not crippling? Would he suggest that there is something acceptable about it? Would he minimize it telling you it will be ok? Would he tell you to go away and come back some other day? Or, go sin boldly so that his grace might abound? Should you bother with anything that Jesus might have to teach you about sin?

If you have read the Great Divorce by Lewis you might remember the man who had a red lizard growing out of his shoulder and the lizard was the sin of lust. An angel asked the man, "Shall I kill it?" The man said, "Couldn't we discuss it another day, or kill it off just a little bit at a time?" "No," says the angel, "now is the time. The gradual process is of no use at all. It's not as if it would kill you to get rid of it." "Yes," the man said, "but it will hurt." "Of course it will hurt," says the angel, "but what would that matter? Now, may I kill it?" The man eventually grants permission and in a searing instant of agony the lizard is killed. The man, freed from this demon, begins his ascent toward heaven where those watching have to strain their necks upward to watch his progress.

The question about what Jesus is teaching you about your sins is more pressing than we might believe. Because Jesus is here today and he is teaching in our church. And his words from the gospel are reaching across time and space and they are shot out like a thousand fletched arrows directed at you. Jesus is not speaking to the person sitting next to you, or to the crooked person that I might like to hold up as the measuring rod against which I seem to stand taller and straighter. I hear Jesus

speaking directly to me. He is speaking directly to you. And he is saying that today is as good as any to accomplish your exodus from the bondage of sin. What demon do you snuggle up to? What sin is hurting you? What is stooping you over? Today is as good as any other to be your liberation day. This very moment, even as I am speaking, is the moment for you to be asking Jesus to kill your demon, to take away your sin, to lift you upright, to deliver you from your affliction. Sin is the problem, Jesus is the remedy, and he is at hand.

Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the Lord will bless thee.