

There is a huge number of new condo units going up in Salt Lake, and they compete for buyers. They each put up a sign on the side to compel you to consider buying from them. Some of them say, "If you lived here, you'd be home now." Some of them list the amenities of life there. But at the corner of North Temple and 3rd West, on a beautiful new building, the marketing people offer something new: *Experience unrivalled grace.*

WOW ---- that's where I'd like to live. I suspect they probably meant a different kind of grace than what I saw in today's scripture readings.

First from Jeremiah; the grace of being known and valued ---- "Before I formed you in the womb," the Lord says to Jeremiah, "I knew you." God is calling Jeremiah to be his prophet, his spokesperson, and Jeremiah replies, "but I don't know how to speak, for I am only a boy." Jeremiah was self-limiting, putting himself down --- and God would have none of it. God put out his hand, touched his lips and put words in his mouth. God promised to deliver him from fear that would hold him back.¹ Pure grace.

As I sat down to prepare today's sermon, and read and re-read through the gospel lesson, I wondered several things: 1) did Jesus ever heal anyone on a day other than the sabbath? and 2) how many healing stories do we need and 3) might each healing story convey a unique message for us? Once again, I see grace in the gospel story of healing --- the grace of being seen, and called over, and healed by Jesus.

The woman in our story has no name, we only know that she was bent over, unable to stand up for eighteen years. Her world had become very small due her limited mobility, and her inability to look up or look around her due to her bent condition. Jesus noticed her and called her to him. Ah; the grace of being seen, being called, being valued and healed by Jesus.

Jesus, in full view and hearing of the crowd, declares her set free from her ailment. Note that he doesn't say healed. The release from her spirit of infirmity is her reality now, Jesus proclaims. Jesus often touches people first and then heals them --- which made him unclean in the eyes of the religious leaders, but this time Jesus declares healing, and then reaches out with a touch of blessing. He blesses her, enabling her to live into that reality. She immediately stands straight up. I imagine she looked in the face of her healer, immediately recognized and honored the source of her freedom and healing. Then, with a huge smile on her face and began praising God.

The woman's life had been severely limited --- as a broken person, an unwhole person, she was considered unclean and not fit for the community. Now, her field of vision was restored, as was her posture, as was her acceptance into the community of the faithful.

God's grace is what this story is about. Her healing and release were not dependent on her faith, nor on the faith of those around her. Jesus was the one who sought her out, bringing with him God's grace. She most likely couldn't see Jesus because of her condition, but she could hear him. When she stood up straight, when she was welcomed back into her community her blinders fell off, and her world was expanded. Her release from the bondage of her ailment has made her a symbol of discovering the freedom of God's kingdom. Once again, she was able to walk in the fullness of life that God had intended.

¹ Jeremiah 1:4-9

Daughter of Abraham, Jesus called her. She had a name of course, but this is the title by which we know her --- daughter of Abraham. An heir to God's covenant of grace which God is always expanding to include more and more people. She is a daughter of promise as are we.

The tension in the Gospel of Luke is building as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem. The crowds are increasing, and the watchful eyes of the religious leaders are ever present. Remember Jesus had begun his ministry in a synagogue by getting in trouble ---- promising to proclaim release to the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to liberate the oppressed.² Those who heard him ran him out of town with the intention of throwing him off a cliff. Following this healing, in which Jesus proclaim release and recovery of sight, and liberation of one who was oppressed, the religious leaders are put to shame, people explode with joy at what God has done in their sight. The perfect echo of Mary's song of lifting up the lowly and sending the rich empty away. The powerless are literally lifted up while those in power are put to shame.

The leader of the synagogue, the scripture tells us, was indignant. But he didn't come after Jesus this time. He focused on the crowd: "why are you coming here to be healed on the Sabbath. Come back when its more appropriate." I imagine he was sensing the danger of freedom that was moving through the crowd and worried what unleashing unrivalled grace to the people might mean. He was trying to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath. Which is exactly what Jesus was trying to do.

The sabbath was given as God's gift to people who had been enslaved: A day of rest per week. It was intended to make a space for them to remember how God had delivered them and declared them free.³ They were to allow nothing to distract them from that focus. That's what it meant to keep the sabbath holy. Sabbath meant a refusal to ever again be enslaved by things that keep them from acknowledging God's goodness. It meant the embrace of dedicated time to explore the things that really matter to God. Sabbath is not a limiting thing, but an invitation to living a fuller life in God. That's the way to keep the sabbath holy.

Jesus was redefining the meaning of a holy sabbath. He continually was showing that God was working in new ways, continuing to push the boundaries and expanding God's generous circle of grace. Mercy matters to God, so show mercy on the Sabbath. Wholeness matters to God: when you help participate in restoring someone to wholeness, you are keeping the sabbath is holy.

The crowds yearned for healing of their diseases as well as freedom from that which bound them, a release from anything that robbed them from living a full life. They saw that Jesus showed them to the reality of God's kingdom, the promise of restoration, release, freedom.

What do you need to be released from? From heavy burdens of responsibility and the weight of worry? The pain of broken relationships? The bondage of guilt? In what ways is your sight limited or your ability to move freely through your life inhibited? Are you crippled by fear, or bent over by self-doubt? Whether you are aware of your need, whether or not you have the courage to ask for it, stand up straight and open your eyes and experience the unrivalled grace of God all around you.

Hopefully this story of God's goodness opens our eyes to what God has done for us and promises to do for us. Both in being made whole and in recognizing those in need of God's promise of freedom. Join me in asking God to lead us as Jesus was led to recognize those in need of release. Join me in asking God to lead us to ways to make God's grace accessible in the world about us, among people with whom we work or live or beside whom we worship each Sunday. Join me in asking God to and in need of God's promise of liberation and unrivalled grace.

² Luke 4: 18

³ Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

