

“Just Do the Thing”

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – August 24, 2025

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be filled
with your courageous compassion and wisdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

It's always the kid, isn't it? The quintessential kid I'm talking about is the one in the old folk tale about the Emperor who is so obsessed with being the best dressed in the land that he is taken in by tailors who convince him that their cloth is so fine only fools couldn't see how superior it is. And it takes a child to point out the obvious: The Emperor has no clothes!

But it's not just that child, is it? Humanity has long told stories about this truth – that children are more likely, more willing to say out loud the thing grown-ups are silently noticing but afraid to bring up. Most of the rest of us have learned to think before we speak; we're aware of cultural norms that mean you try not to embarrass others, even if they are actively making fools of themselves. I think these stories that we tell are trying to convince us that many of us have learned that lesson too well, that we'd be better off if we listened to the children in our midst more often, and let their courage – or lack of self-consciousness – speak truth into our often messed-up society. I wonder if that kind of clear sight and judgment is what Jesus was talking about when he said we must enter the kingdom of heaven like children. I wonder if

this is part of the reason God called Jeremiah at such a young age. Perhaps youth wasn't a disqualifier – “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’” – but actually a strength for the role Jeremiah was being asked to play. It was not a job most adults would relish: to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” That sounds like a job that would make everyone mad at you, doesn't it? But a kid might enjoy it; just think of how much pleasure some children get from building up towers of blocks and immediately knocking them down as loudly as possible.

It isn't mindless destruction God is looking for though. I think some of that seemingly impulsive childlike energy is coming through Jesus in this story we read from Luke. He saw something wrong, and he moved to fix it, without thinking through where he was or what day it was or whether it was the “appropriate” thing to do or not. And by doing so, he brought the kingdom of God a little closer.

It's important to notice everything that was happening in this story. The individual story matters. It seems like this woman was probably well known, since the writer knew it had been “eighteen long years” that she had suffered from what must have been a terribly painful condition. She must have brought herself to the synagogue on a regular basis, despite the pain she lived with every day. People knew her, though we don't know if they cared for her or tried to avoid her. Unfortunately, we often turn away from people with chronic conditions like this, because we don't like the sense of helplessness that comes from knowing there's nothing we can do to

make her feel better, and we certainly don't want to think about the fact that such a thing could also happen to us at some point. On the other hand, it's not that hard to imagine that the community had adapted for her, found ways for her to participate, made sure she could sit where she could see without something or someone too tall in front of her. When we have personal relationships with those whose needs are different from our own, it's not that hard to find ways to make things work for everyone.

So it's not that hard to imagine that when Jesus healed this woman of her condition, it was a joy for everyone. The story tells us that she "stood up straight and began praising God." It doesn't say that anyone else did, but surely people were at least amazed. It clearly got the attention of the crowd, because the next thing you know, Jesus is getting in trouble. Now, there is no way Jesus didn't know that rule about not performing cures on the sabbath. He spent A LOT of time in synagogues. He had been sitting there teaching. He knew what day it was. But the kingdom broke through, and Jesus was ushering it in like the child of God he was. "Woman, you are set free!" He was changing the story – her individual story, but also the community's story. By the time he's done castigating the leaders for acting like their rules should take precedence over ending suffering, the whole community is rejoicing. Because they didn't want to live in a world where the official schedule is more important than they are. They knew it wasn't just that woman that needed healing, but that the world

that she lived in needed fixing as well. They knew that doing the “appropriate” thing is not always the same as doing the right thing. So when they watched Jesus do the right thing, in spite of what the “appropriate” thing was, they saw their world shifting closer to the way it ought to be.

The leaders of that synagogue may very well have complained about Jesus acting like a child. But I think he would have proudly agreed! He was acting like a child, moving on the impulse of compassion, doing the right thing no matter what rules it broke, plucking up and pulling down cultural norms so that he could build and plant new ways of living that prioritized tending to those who are hurting. It’s not that it’s a bad thing to have one day set aside for worship and contemplation. Indeed, it’s a life-giving pattern we still follow. But when that pattern is allowed to block the flow of God’s healing and compassion, it becomes a hollow legalism that shapes a world distorted from the way God desires us to live. When a child speaks up and breaks through such nonsense, we all feel relief.

It’s good that we’re reading this story the Sunday before our first Saturday Forum on Exploring Disability Justice. This is a subject I am still learning about myself, but there is one thing I have picked up. In many cases, people who are seen as disabled do not desire their own healing as much as they long for a world that reduces the barriers they experience to full participation in society. Like in this story, it’s as much the world that needs fixing as the people moving living in it. Again and again,

we see examples of how the accommodations created for people with various disabilities actually make life easier for all of us. A curb cut is easier for those in wheelchairs, but also for children or people on bikes. Audio books – enjoyed by thousands as they exercise or commute – began as Books for the Blind. The capacity to make the type on a webpage bigger is useful for those with limited vision as well as those adjusting to middle-aged eyes. So often, it’s the world that needs fixing, not the people, so that all of us can live easier.

To resist such adaptations, because of how they require us to learn how to do things differently or how they impact the “bottom line” is to embody those synagogue leaders who would have had the woman go at least one more day in pain in order to avoid disrupting the sabbath. We can be like Jesus – people who break down norms that are not serving God’s people to shape a better world where compassion directs our actions. We can call out injustice, without worrying about the proper tone or whether we’re causing inconvenience. Building the kingdom of God will require as much plucking up and pulling down as it will building up and planting. The constructs of our society were not designed to serve compassion and mercy. If we’re willing to live like the true children of God that we are, with clear sight, creativity, and bold compassion, we can shape a new and better world. Hallelujah and Amen!