

The Right Time

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Luke 13:10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in a church on Sunday. And just then, there appeared two men who had been together for 18 years, but whom the church had not married. When Jesus saw them, he called them over and said...

I thought about reading that and then sitting down, leaving the rest of the sermonizing process to the response time. That would have made my life substantially easier. But unfortunately my re-working of this story opens some tangents that need to be dealt with. It is not a perfect analogy. First of all, I want to make it clear that I'm not saying that our gay and lesbian members are in need of healing for some sort of ailment, or that they have a demon. But I am saying that for years they have been denied full participation in the life of the church.

But in this story the status of the woman, her disease and even her participation in the synagogue aren't the central issue; nor are they the central theme of my sermon. The question this passage raises, at least for me, is this: is it ever the wrong time to do the right thing?

In the reading from Luke, the question was "should one heal on the Sabbath?" The traditional, institutional response was clearly "no." Jesus however, somehow, decided to go against the law, against the religious institutions, against the synagogue leaders and said "yes." This was not the first time, in fact. Earlier in Luke, he had healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. Prior to that, on another Sabbath, he and the disciples had picked grain to eat. I get the sense that Jesus saw this issue as important enough to keep tweaking the Pharisees.

Much of our congregational discernment and much of our discussions with our conference have revolved around timing and speed. We are told we have pushed, too hard and too fast. We are told to wait, to be patient. We wonder among ourselves if we can hold out for a better or safer time.

Every social movement has needed to pick a time and a place for action. I have to wonder — does history ever prove that doing the right thing has happened too soon? Do we now harshly judge churches or leaders that stood at a vanguard for their hastiness? Should Paul and Peter have waited to include gentiles? Should the first Anabaptists have waited before baptizing one another? Should the Mennonites and Quakers who colonized Germantown, Pennsylvania, have waited before publishing their anti-slavery petition? Should Broad Street Mennonite have held off interracial footwashing in the 1940s because it violated Virginia Conference's practice of sacramental segregation? Should Martin Luther King Jr. have taken the advice of a group of religious leaders who advised him to go slow and not promote civil disobedience?

All of these movements faced opposition, and even oppression to the point of martyrdom. None were popular; none were even considered "effective" at the time. But history looks on these people and communities as saints and exemplars of justice. Instead of judging them for pushing the envelope, we tend to judge those who kept the status quo, who preserved unity and who kept silent.

Perhaps it is not possible to do the right thing "too soon" — but Martin Luther King's example also reminds us of the importance of being ready to do the right thing. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," he describes a process of preparation for nonviolent protest: "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist, negotiation, self purification and

[then] direct action.”¹ King placed a strong emphasis on spiritual and political preparedness for their next steps. Instead of waiting for a world that was ready for his movement, he made sure that the movement was ready for the world.

So how does a church become ready? How do we spiritually prepare ourselves to take our next steps? We're quite good at discerning and discussing, negotiating and studying. I don't think we've neglected prayer in this process, but perhaps we've inclined too far towards keeping our congregational decision making apart from our corporate worship life. I have consistently resisted directly addressing these issues from the pulpit; today's sermon has caused me a fair amount of anxiety, in fact. But perhaps if we are at King's stage of self-purification, it is important for us to engage our discussion at a liturgical as well as a policy level. Notice that throughout Luke, Jesus often used synagogues as spark-points for his work of new creation. Remember that it is Luke that reports Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry announcing God's reign in a synagogue. These small groups of faithful people who came together to discuss God's word and work received the first glimpses of Jesus' mission.

Many of you are fatigued by this conversation, and rightly so. It has gone on a long time. We do not desire to be defined by our status of discipline or by our teachings about sexuality. There are those who worry that we move too quickly and those who are frustrated that we move too slowly. But all of us want to do the right thing.

There is a difference between worrying whether we move too early or too late and discerning whether the time is right. It seems as though the first step in discerning the time is knowing what is the right thing to do. Once we have that wisdom, justifying a delay becomes more and more difficult. Perhaps the right time to do something is the time we realize the right thing to do.

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," 1963.
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Returning to the reading from Luke, we see that Jesus' choice of time and place were very intentional. Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza points out that this healing was not urgent — nor was any of Jesus' other Sabbath healings. Jewish custom and law would have permitted the saving of a life on the Sabbath, but this was not an urgent care situation. Jesus could have easily chosen to do the right thing either the day before or the day after. Instead, he *chose* the Sabbath and the synagogue.²

N.T. Wright explains that it was not merely happenstance that Jesus healed on the Sabbath — it was, in fact, the most appropriate possible time for this act of liberation. The Sabbath serves as a sign-post of “release from captivity, from bondage, as well as from work.” By performing this miracle — in the synagogue, no less — “Jesus is claiming that Israel's great coming Sabbath day *was already breaking in* in his own ministry.”³ Jesus inaugurated a world in which Sabbath liberation is a way of life.

Jesus choice of time and place indicate to me that he was not merely waiting until the coast was clear, or the climate was right, or until opposition to his position had moderated. Instead, he used the Sabbath and the synagogue to indicate that this type of healing was God's own work, and a sign of God's reign.

The questions before us, then:

How can we advance God's cause here and now?

How can we use this house of worship to liberate? To call people into God's reign?

And finally, are we ready?

² Elisabeth Shüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 1983, p. 125.

³ N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1996, p. 394-395.