

## Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

### IMPEDIMENTS

There are reduced-price tickets you can get to some Broadway shows that are described as ‘partial view.’<sup>1</sup> There may be a column partially in the way where the person in the seat has to lean to see the full stage. Or the seat might be far to the right or left side of the theater so that some action stage right or stage left wouldn’t be fully seen. Broadway tickets are not inexpensive, so sometimes a slightly obstructed view would at least be a way to get into the show. The tickets will generally say right on them that they are considered to be ‘partial view’ tickets so some scalper won’t try to get away with selling them for full price.

We hear of a woman in our gospel story today who had a ‘partial view’ seat to the drama of life. She could not look directly at anyone else face to face. She could not look up at the sky. The afflicted woman could only look down at her feet and at the ground. Her inability to look out in front of her must have affected her outlook. She had had this affliction for eighteen years, which gave her only a partial view of others and quite possibly of herself. But still she went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Evidently, she had not grown bitter about her condition nor did she blame God for the difficulties of her daily life. On the particular Sabbath day described in Luke, this woman was liberated from her ailment. She was set free from the imprisonment of her own body. She was suddenly able to stand up straight and we are told that when she did so, she started praising God. Clearly, this was something to be celebrated not just by the woman!

But with his inability to celebrate what was celebration-worthy, we become aware of another person who found himself located with only a ‘partial view’ of the great drama that was taking place. The leader of the synagogue, instead of leading a community expression of deep gratitude about the healing that he had been blessed to observe, expresses his consternation about what had happened. He begins to tell the crowd that if they were seeking healing for some ailment, they should seek it some other time, not on the Sabbath day. It actually sounds like the man is chiding Jesus and the woman, not simply sharing instruction with the crowd. Perhaps the column that was blocking this man’s full view of the situation was the column of rules about Sabbath observance. In a society where there were not overtime laws to protect workers from getting run down physically, the limits on work on the Sabbath were intended to allow people to benefit from the gift of a day of physical rest each week. Yes, the Sabbath was about both spiritual and physical renewal! As the leader of the synagogue and an interpreter of what kind of work was or wasn’t allowable on the Sabbath, this man had a fair amount of control over what ought to be happening in ‘his’ synagogue. Healing was to be considered work by the way he saw things, so sometime other than the Sabbath was the only time when such a thing was appropriate.

Meanwhile, Jesus has the perfect seat to see all that was happening. His initial focus was on the woman who was clearly afflicted in a way that affected her physically and otherwise. He knew he had the God-given power to make a tremendous difference in her life. To have withheld that healing power would not have honored the God who had liberated so many others before the woman, so Jesus takes the initiative. Without her even approaching him, he sizes up the woman’s situation, expresses verbally that she is being set free from her ailment, and then lays hands on her. The woman may not have even thought of herself as worthy to seek healing on the Sabbath day or at another time. But Jesus sees God’s good intent for her and seizes the day for her. He goes on to refer to her as a valued daughter of Abraham, an heir of the covenant God had initiated. That too may have enabled her to stand a little straighter.

Jesus also saw clearly that those who oversaw the Sabbath observance rules interpreted them in ways that met their own needs, but not the needs of others. He pointed out that it could also be considered work to untie an animal and lead it to water on the Sabbath. And yet, relieving the thirst of an animal wasn't considered to be a violation of the Sabbath. Why then would relieving the suffering of a woman who had been tied up in knots for eighteen years be a violation of God's will for what should happen on the Sabbath day? On this day of rest, Jesus was not going to let the issue rest. He had escorted the woman to where she could better see God's dramatic good will for her life. Now he wanted the synagogue leader to have a better view of things as well.

He doesn't mince words about the synagogue leader's resistance, pointing out his hypocrisy. His goal is not to ridicule, but to show the man, who may not realize he has only a partial view of God's will, that the way he is applying religious rules shows how he is living inconsistently. It is a cautionary tale as we come to realize that even when we are applying rules for our faith community, we can totally miss and even oppose God's good intent for those who suffer and for those who seek to live a life of faith.

Perhaps it is not a physical ailment nor how we apply our Sabbath rules that keep us from seeing all that God wants us to see. We heard in our first scripture reading about Jeremiah, when he was just a young lad, how he could not envision that God could use him because he was too young. His partial view of things needed to be expanded to understand that God can use anyone of any age for divine purposes. How old were Abraham and Sarah when God established a covenant through them? This week, many of us were stunned by pictures of a five year old boy named Omran Daqneesh, dazed and bloodied after airstrikes hit his family's house in Aleppo, Syria. In response to a war that the United Nations has estimated to have taken the lives of over 400,000 people, displacing millions more, there has been a response of huge indifference. In the words of Scott Simon from National Public Radio, "Maybe the face of a small boy, silent and sad-eyed in a hellish landscape, will provoke more people to look more deeply into Syria, and themselves."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this Sabbath day in a place of worship, we can acknowledge that we also sit in 'partial view' seats before the great drama of what God is doing in our world to bring healing and wholeness. I hope we can agree that pointing out the hypocrisy when expressions of faith say one thing and do another can be used by God to help all see a bit more clearly what is happening on the big stage. Perhaps we can agree that Jesus is a good one to help us see more of what is important about God's intent in the world. And finally, we can recognize and celebrate that God can work whenever and wherever using whomever God chooses to bring about liberation and God's good intent. When we situate ourselves to be able to see that, then we are less likely to be impediments to others blocking their view from seeing the great and holy drama unfolding before us all.

<sup>1</sup> 'Partial view' imagery acknowledged with gratitude to Alyce McKenzie, <http://www.patheos.com/Progressive-Christian/Partial-View-Seats-Alyce-McKenzie-08-16-2013>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npr.org/2016/08/20/490682349/in-the-face-of-a-bloodied-boy-a-call-to-look-more-deeply-at-syria>