

When Religion Gets in the Way

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

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You may have seen this opinion piece in *USA Today* this past week. It was written by a 15 year-old girl from Virginia named Stacia Datskovska. The title of the article grabbed my attention, “Churches Could Win Back Teens Like Me if They Were More Welcoming and Less Judgmental.”

Stacia recounted going to church with her mother on Easter morning. As they dipped their fingers into the holy water to make the sign of the cross, a woman wearing an ankle-length skirt hurriedly approached them “boasting a self-important demeanor,” she wrote. The woman promptly chastised Stacia mother for wearing pants into “God’s house.” Here’s what 15 year-old Stacia wrote about that encounter,

I suddenly understood why so many of my friends were making promises to leave their respective denominations. Like I did that day at church, they likely felt alienated from attending a service that is supposed to instill hope.

She went on to quote various studies that have noted the decline in church attendance in this country, especially among young adults and teens. She ended the article with this,

When teens see churches adopting a welcoming presence, they might just take this as a sign to move beyond their own prejudices and explore spirituality. Ultimately, young people like me just need to know that “God’s house” does not have to be a room full of people shivering in slightly too cold pews.

(USA Today, August 18, 2019)

Imagine something like that happening to you. You go to church and some self-important person chastises you for breaking the rules,

rules that really aren't important to begin with. You just might not go back, right?

Kelly told me recently about a woman she knows who lived her adult life in a church tradition that obsesses over how women dress. Not how the men dress. Only the women. They obsess over how the women wear their hair and the kind of jewelry they wear. Not the men. Kelly said this woman has gone through a major life change, and has been set free from that church. God bless her! I hope she can find a church that is built upon grace.

When churches obsess over rules like that, they have missed the meaning of Christian faith. When churches adopt that posture—when they put rules before people, when “the system” becomes more important than the individual, when the law is elevated above grace, when legalism chokes the life out of the Spirit—when that happens, religion is getting in the way.

Jesus had to confront this in his day too. Luke is the only one to record this story about Jesus and the woman who was bent over. Thank you, Luke! Thank you, Luke, for this gift. Women and girls, this is your story. It is for all of us, yes, but it is particularly for our women and girls. Jesus was your champion. He was at the synagogue one day, the last time he would enter a synagogue in Luke's gospel. It was the Sabbath. The woman in this story is never named. She was the unnamed representative of most women in her culture, and perhaps some women today, maybe even someone in this room. She had a “spirit that crippled her,” Luke tells us. It might have been osteoporosis or arthritis; we don't know. Luke says that she had been this way for eighteen years, possibly his way of saying “for a very long time.” For all those years, this unnamed woman was bent over, forced to look downward, humbled, shamed, unable to stand upright and look at life straight on.

Notice that the woman did not approach Jesus. She was simply at the synagogue to worship, which was likely her custom. She made no request of Jesus. The text says nothing of her faith.

No, Jesus was the primary actor in this encounter. Luke says he saw the unnamed woman who was bent over and called her to him. She must

have been staring at his feet. Or maybe she wrenched her neck enough to look into Jesus' eyes. Then she heard the words she had hoped to hear for eighteen long years, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." I like the way the old King James Version reads: "Woman, thou art loosed." Jesus then laid his hands upon her, and immediately she stood up straight. A person. With dignity. Healed by the power of God. Empowered by the grace of Jesus.

And the woman praised God, Luke tells us. I bet she did!

But then religion got in the way. The third character in this story is called "the leader of the synagogue." He was indignant. Jesus broke the rules. He couldn't do that on the Sabbath. Everybody knew that. You don't wear pants to church, and you don't heal an unnamed woman on the Sabbath. It was considered work, and the faithful were commanded not to work on the Sabbath. Jesus had six days in the week to heal people, the leader of the synagogue said, but he must not do that on the Sabbath.

Did you notice what Jesus called the leader of the synagogue? A hypocrite. They made a provision for unbinding an ox or a donkey and leading it to water on the Sabbath. Actually, the law prescribed a certain kind of knot that had to be used on the Sabbath. If you used that certain knot, which I assume was easy to untie, you could lead your animal to water.

You hypocrite, Jesus charged. You unbind an animal that has been tethered for a few hours and lead it to water on the Sabbath, but you will not allow a woman who has been bound by Satan for eighteen long years to be unbound. So Jesus set her free. And notice what he called her. Jesus called this unnamed woman a daughter of Abraham. This is the only time in the entire Bible where a woman is called a daughter of Abraham. She went from being an unnamed victim to being the daughter of Father Abraham. A person. With dignity. Healed by the power of God. Empowered by the grace of Jesus.

The people loved it. All the people who had gathered at the synagogue rejoiced. What they knew intuitively about the nature of religion won that day. A person was put above the rules. Finally! An individual was more important than the system. Finally! Grace was

elevated above the law. Finally! The Spirit won out over legalism. Finally! And the people rejoiced.

Remember the title of the article by Stacia Datskovska? “Churches Could Win Back Teens Like Me if They Were More Welcoming and Less Judgmental.” We could go to churches in Huntsville today where women and girls are still bent over, forced to look downward, humbled, shamed, unable to stand upright and look at life straight on. When churches treat women that way, those churches represent a religion that is getting in the way. Let me push a little further. When churches treat people of different races that way, those churches represent a religion that is getting in the way. A little further still. When churches treat people who are gay and lesbian that way, those churches represent a religion that is getting in the way.

The church as an institution in this country is at a crossroads. We’re losing teens like Stacia. We’re losing young adults who see us as the hypocrites. We’re not going to turn this around with a catchy marketing campaign. We’re not going to be able to “revival” our way out of it either. *The only way I see this turning around is for our churches to be more like Jesus. To be truly welcoming. To be truly filled with grace. To be truly alive to the Spirit. To be truly overflowing with love.*

I’m convinced people are hungry for that. Fifteen year olds. Twenty-five year olds. Eighty-five year olds. Are you? Do you long to be unbound, loosed, set free? I hope someone here today who has been bent over can feel the healing power of God and stand upright and praise God. O Lord, let it be so! Amen.