

Luke 13:10-17; DFV intro

In today's reading it's the Sabbath, the Jewish rest day, the community day of worship. But not everyone is resting, not everyone has the heart for worship. Some are bowed down so deep in poverty, they can't afford a day of rest. Some are too hungry to think, too hungry to walk, and too sad to sing.

And one woman is bent over with her eyes on the dirt under her feet. She's has some sort of illness which has kept her hunched over, her muscles clenched. Maybe she has fused vertebrae or osteoporosis. Perhaps there's nerve damage.

Her sort of disfigurement makes her stand out, it sets her apart, but in all the wrong sort of ways. She'd also have been socially affected, she wouldn't have participated in things others were able to, perhaps she had been rejected as a marriage prospect and her income depended on begging. 'She was quite unable to stand up' and 18 years is a long time. We understand it's not just the physical condition that affected her - a spirit had crippled her, Satan had bound her. It may have been a spiritually based physical ailment, like Job, she may have been singled out for attack of a physical nature by God's enemy, some people still suffer this way. Alternatively it could be a genetic or injury based disability, and while she has been suffering a spiritual attack has added another item to her list of woes - despair and discouragement, or a sense of unworthiness and rejection. We guess the priests have deemed her unclean and she is prevented from seeking the comfort of God's presence and community fellowship in the synagogue.

Like many in our own world, the unlovely and the unloved, the forgotten and overlooked, for her the Sabbath is no different to any other day, she carries the same burdens, and has the same pain and rejection as the rest of the week. No rest. No worship.

There is no word of complaint. No cry to the healer for help like blind Bartimeus. She is resigned to her fate, and trudges on, eyes down. Uncomfortable, others avert their eyes as she walks past. But God sees her. Jesus sees her. He calls her over, lays hands on her gently and says 'Woman you are set free from your ailment.' As he heals her physically his touch restores her socially.

The result is immediate and remarkable. The bent woman stands up straight. The silent woman begins praising God. She who had no rest from her ailment is at peace, the one with no song worships.

Unfortunately it's not only rejoicing we hear. The synagogue leader is indignant, he argues against healing on the Sabbath (13:14). Doing good is not the point, Jesus' deeds are illegal and unsanctioned. He undermines their control and order. He changes things, and shows them up - they are only representing themselves, not God.

Jesus turns the tables, upholding the woman's dignity. You'd be happy to meet the needs of your livestock on the sabbath...this woman is a child of Abraham! Shame on you!

Other daughters of the Patriarch, overlooked for their gender, and their situation in their communities, also found freedom in Jesus' life-giving care.

Who might these women be today? I'm going to name one group but I offer a warning that the topic I am going to raise may be difficult for you if you have suffered yourself or who know someone who has. Let me read you some statistics.

The fastest growing rate of homelessness in Australia is older women. In Australia one in three women experience physical violence in their lifetime. One in six Australian women experience physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, and one in four experience emotional abuse from a partner. (Plus Gender & DFV)

Do you think perhaps, some of these women are bowed down. Emotionally, physically, spiritually? And like the crowds in Jesus time, although these women are clearly living amongst us, in our families, as friends and neighbours, many times we have averted our eyes. We have shamefully been like the leaders of Jesus day - wagging our finger at the one suffering, whilst overlooking those who oppress.

For a long time the only grounds for breaking a marriage was unfaithfulness of the other partner. In churches, we have, wrongly and dangerously, encouraged women to stay in situations that threatened their children's lives and wellbeing.

Some unhelpful ways of explaining Bible passages encouraged abusive thinking and behaviour. And by emphasising some characteristics of the ideal wife while overlooking the clear instruction for husbands to care for their wives in the way they care for themselves, in the sort of way Christ cares for the church - with deep, nurturing, sacrificial, attentive and kind-hearted love, we have sometimes promoted unhealthy relationship patterns and expectations which have led to, condoned and covered over abuse.

So LET ME SAY CLEARLY: Women and Men are EQUAL in the eyes of God, and they have the SAME human rights; A husband's headship (however you understand this idea) does NOT give him a right to abuse his wife; and there ARE various situations where divorce is soundly biblical.

While we have been blind and deaf, Jesus has seen those who suffered, their trouble and pain, he heard their cries. And he has been challenging us to take notice. For instance...

'Last year ABC news investigations revealed the disturbing extent of sexual violations, trauma and abuse perpetrated against women and children by their clergy husbands. These confronting revelations underscore what we already knew – that the church has too often ignored abused women and, in many cases, enabled abusers and perpetuated violence.'

What a desperately sad time for the Australian Church. These reports have taken us into the heart of darkness, and it could not be clearer how urgently we need to change the culture that has failed so many victims.

Common Grace strongly believes that the local church can be a critical support to abuse survivors, which is why [they] produced SAFER – a vital resource that all church leaders should study and refer to. This...has been a labour of love and we've spent years, tears and prayers in putting this all together...'

The statistics are just the tip of the iceberg...[and] mean that within churches there are both victims and perpetrators. How the church and Christians respond to them is crucial in seeing justice, healing and transformation. In some cases, churches have responded to domestic & family violence in wonderfully supportive ways... However sadly there have been countless times when the church has let women and children down, and sometimes put them even more at risk through disbelief, minimising the victim's experience, or staying silent. This inadequate response must not continue. (Common Grace)

Luke tells us Jesus went about doing good, and he continues to do this in our times. Freeing those in bondage at work, at home, in their bodies and minds, in all sorts of oppression, including domestic and family violence. Jesus always protects the vulnerable and exposes evil. As his disciples, his practice and teaching invite our participation in the redemptive work of the Father.

We want to follow the example of Jesus: who is our model for equal, loving, and mutual human relationships. But how do we invest in this call for safety and justice? What would it mean to open our eyes and their hearts to people struggling in abusive relationships? What could it mean for the church to collectively and loudly cry "no more"? How do we start? We

- understand how domestic and family violence starts*
- recognise different kinds of abuse*
- find the right help for victims*
- appropriately support people affected by abuse*
- encourage perpetrators to change their behaviour*
- encourage gender equality, human rights for all*
- promote love that bears Christ's image and respectful relationships*
- challenge poor attitudes to women and girls, and call out abusive comments*
- create safe churches*

- *not offer forgiveness at the expense of a person's welfare and safety, and not be soft on change in the lives of those who have been perpetrators of abuse*

The Diocese is in the process of training its leaders to be able to recognise, assist and support those experiencing DFV. I've put a notice on the boards in our foyers today to help you to be aware of the importance of this work.

In Geelong you can seek help from places like the Orange Door, or call Lifeline. I will also listen to and support those who needs assistance.

Common Grace has established a website called SAFER (www.saferresource.org.au/) as a resource to help Australian churches understand, identify, and respond to domestic and family violence. You can check that out too.

Today I'm only scratching the surface, whispering words for change and new beginnings. But this is not nothing it is a start. And it matters.

The unnamed woman in Luke testifies to the freedom, acceptance and renewal that can be found in Jesus. Let us as God's people **not** be found in the company of those who begrudge the liberty people find as they are freed from the things that trouble them. Let us rejoice in the wonderful things God can, will and is doing around us to protect, encourage, enable, and free those in bondage. Let us share in the sorts of change that needs to happen in our churches and communities, and promote the protection and restoration of those in need.

Where Jesus is, the kingdom is. Where Jesus is, things begin to be made right. His ministry is a foretaste of the coming kingdom, as his work is carried on, the world is being repaired. One day there will be no blindness or loss of hearing, no one broken or disfigured, no abused or abuser. All will be free and whole.

Lord, may your kingdom come.

Let us pray.

God of the universe, all people are made in your image. They are known by you and loved by you. Bring your boundless resources to help women and children around the world who are experiencing violence of any kind. You know each of them by name.

We pray for governments around the world to rule wisely to make and enforce laws to protect women and children from violence and create safe communities.

Provide support agencies with the resources they need to provide for the needs of victims. Bring change to the culture that permits, ignores, downplays or excuses violence. Give your grace, comfort and healing to all those who suffer.

Give us understanding and keep us vigilant to recognise those who need assistance, knowing that violence does not always involve physical scarring and bruising. God, we grieve for those who have had their lives taken by the violent. We grieve for what was taken, and for what the world is losing in their deaths. We pray for their families and friends. You are near to the broken-hearted, and you save the crushed in spirit. For those whose trust in partners or family has been betrayed,

we ask for your help and we ask for your justice. Provide people who will listen, understand, and care.

We thank you for men and boys who are already drivers of the change needed. We ask that you continue to give these peacemakers wisdom, humility and understanding in their roles as leaders, supporters, counsellors and advocates. Continue to raise up more men and boys to take a stand against aggressive and disrespectful attitudes and behaviours. We pray that championing the safety of women and children, and embodying gentle, respectful relationships will become a priority.

Fill young people with your vision for loving, healthy relationships based on service and kindness. Give them strong role models to help develop character. Help churches and youth groups offer real support and community. Grant wisdom to policy makers and educators as they deliver respectful relationship programs in schools. And may your love transform and your life-giving Spirit empower emerging generations to challenge stereotyped beliefs, to value one another, and to live holy and loving lives.

We give you thanks that nothing is impossible with you, and that you open the door for repentance and forgiveness in the costly loving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

ALMIGHTY and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done. Lord, have mercy upon us, spare those who confess their faults. Restore those that are penitent; according to your promises declared to us in Christ Jesus. And grant, merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of your holy Name. Amen.

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