

FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE CLOUD OF WITNESSES AND THE WOMAN WHO STOOD TALL”

Scripture Lesson: Luke 13: 10-21

*This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 24, 2025
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 13: 10-21

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.” 15 But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? 16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” 17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed

18 He said therefore, “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 19 It is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in the garden; it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air made nests in its branches.”

The Parable of the Yeast

20 And again he said, “To what should I compare the kingdom of God? 21 It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

The Cloud of Witnesses and the Woman Who Stood Tall

Leader: The word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Last week we talked about the great “cloud of witnesses” who surround us in faith. But not every witness makes headlines. Some are quiet, unseen, perhaps unnoticed, but their presence matters. This morning’s lectionary reading from Luke’s Gospel introduces us to such a witness: a bent-over woman in the back of the synagogue, whose name we never learn. Everyone else looked past her, but Jesus saw her, and he drew her into the very center of God’s story.

It happened in a synagogue, a Jewish church, if you will, and Jesus was serving as the guest rabbi. He was invited to read and expound upon the Scriptures, not altogether different from what happens when a

sermon is preached from this pulpit. At different points in human history there have been expressions of segregation, even in the church, and this story was no exception. The men of that day would have been seated close, holding places of prominence, while those of lesser standing, especially women, would have been much farther away. All eyes would have been on Jesus, and hardly anyone would have noticed this woman who had discreetly slipped in the back.

And why should they have noticed her? She was not important. What's more, she was infirm. She was bent over, unable to straighten herself, a condition she had endured for eighteen long years. Think about just how long that is. For those who may be new or recent empty nesters, her pain endured for as long as you had your child under your roof—though I am not suggesting that having children at home is something we must endure, even if it can feel that way at times. The point is, this woman lived in pain for a very long time, unable to look others in the eye and unable to see more than a few feet ahead.

And yet she comes. She does not interrupt Jesus. She is not like the woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years and reached out to touch the hem of his garment. This woman simply takes her seat at the back. She does not complain, cry out, or interrupt. She listens to the Word of God, one among many who seem small and overlooked, yet who are, by the grace of God, counted among that great cloud of witnesses.

So far, everything unfolds as we might expect, and then something unusual happens. Jesus notices her, and he calls her forward. Perhaps you have been in a crowded place and thought someone was calling to you, but you were not quite sure. Who, me? Why wouldn't she wonder that? There was no reason for anyone to notice her. She was marginalized by her gender, burdened by a disability, and stigmatized by the theology of the day, which suggested her suffering was the result of her sin.

But Jesus calls her and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He lays his hands upon her, and for the first time in nearly two decades, she stands up straight and begins praising God.

One would think the whole synagogue would erupt in joy, joining her song of praise, but not everyone is pleased. The leader of the synagogue uses the moment as an opportunity for rebuke. He says, "There are six days to do work. Come on those days to be healed, but not on the Sabbath." Notice that his rebuke is not directed at Jesus alone, but at the people. It is as if he fears that the joy of the moment might spread. In a sense, he has good reason to worry, because joy is contagious. Grace is contagious. The kingdom of God is contagious. It grows, as Jesus later says, like yeast working through dough, causing it to rise.

Jesus responds by pointing out that even on the Sabbath people untie their oxen and donkeys to lead them to water. If God's creatures deserve such care, how much more does a daughter of Abraham deserve it? His words expose the leader's hypocrisy. When we care more for animals, or customs, or institutions than for the well-being of a child of God, we have missed the heart of the law.

Jesus then tells two short parables: one about a mustard seed that grows into a tree where birds make their home, and another about yeast that works its way through the dough. The point is that the kingdom of God grows in ways that may seem small, hidden, and insignificant, yet in time it brings abundant life.

St. Augustine once reflected that the miracles of Jesus were not merely displays of power, but signs pointing to the far greater miracle of salvation. He wrote, "The miracles of Christ are divine works which lead the mind to the invisible reality of God." In other words, that bent-over woman was not only restored in body. She became a sign of God's kingdom, and her standing tall was a witness to the living God who raises the lowly, lifts the downcast, and makes all things new.

At times, we may feel like that woman, as though our witness is meager and our contribution small. But in God's economy of grace, small things matter. A prayer whispered in faith, a kind word spoken, a meal shared in love, these things do not vanish. They take root and they grow.

This week I reread a note written to me nearly a year ago, simply thanking me for presiding at a graveside service. It was short and easy to write, yet I still have it, and it still encourages me. That is so often how God works. Through small, ordinary things—water and Word, bread and cup—God gives life.

That is what we celebrate when we gather around the Lord's Table. John Calvin reminded us that in this holy meal, Jesus not only assures us of his grace, but nourishes our spirits. These elements of bread and cup may appear ordinary, but Jesus makes them extraordinary. As the hymn writer Samuel Stone once said, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord." When we gather at this Table, we are joined with Christ and with that great cloud of witnesses—saints and sinners, past and present—all made one in Christ Jesus.

So this morning, as we come to this Table, let us remember that bent-over woman in the synagogue, the one who now stands tall in God's grace. Let us remember that even the smallest witness and the most ordinary faithfulness can, by God's grace, bear extraordinary fruit in God's kingdom. And when we rise from this Table, may we rise as she did, praising God and ready to take our next steps as people whose lives point not to themselves, but to the Lord who lifts us up.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.