

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*August 10, 2025*

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## **Liberating Gospel**

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

First let's name something: the way the woman in this scene is treated is terrible. She is not consulted once in the whole narrative. Jesus and the synagogue leader speak about her, even take action on her behalf, all without ever involving her in her own healing, a fairly major development in her life. The closest we come to her being involved is Jesus telling her, not asking, telling her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."<sup>1</sup>

I wonder how many women in this room have been talked about by men as though they weren't even present. I wonder how many have had men take action on their behalf without consulting or involving them in any sort of decision making. I wonder how many have been argued over, while erstwhile being ignored. Just a reminder, the Gospels were written by imperfect men who were products of their time. I say that not to excuse, but to remind you all that we must consider historical and cultural contexts as we wrestle with scripture.

And don't get me wrong, the text makes it clear that the woman is pleased with her healing. As soon as she was healed the text tells us she "stood up straight and began praising God."<sup>2</sup> Though that's not the greatest translation. The verb tense of "praising" is imperfect indicative which indicates an activity begun in the past that is not complete (otherwise it would be aorist

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:12b (NRSVUE)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:13b (NRSVUE)

tense). So a better translation, and one that adds another layer to what's going on here, might be she "stood up and resumed praising God."

Why is that verb tense important? After she is healed the focus switches to an argument between Jesus and the synagogue leader...over what? The Sabbath. What is the sabbath for? Rest certainly, but also attending to our relationships, with one another, and with God! We attend to our relationship with God through worship and praise, service and community. That woman was praising God before her healing, and she stood up to continue praising God after she was healed. Let's ignore Jesus and the synagogue leader for a moment and recognize that this woman was keeping the Sabbath holy. She was keeping the commandment and she certainly ended up "calling the Sabbath a delight"<sup>3</sup> as the prophet Isaiah encouraged.

Jesus and the synagogue leader get into an argument over Sabbath keeping, meanwhile the healed woman is being an excellent example of that very thing! Ultimately Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the established religious systems around the Sabbath: they are willing to care for their animals on the Sabbath, but not their neighbors in need. Then there is the patriarchal system to consider too. One wonders if the synagogue leader would have been quite so mortified if the person healed were a prominent male member of the community. But that is *eisegesis*, reading into the text from my own views, rather than *exegesis*, reading the text in its context and considering authorial intent.

At the heart of this encounter we find Jesus placing liberation as of greater importance than even keeping Sabbath rules and traditions. He is perfectly willing to throw out centuries of Jewish doctrine regarding the Sabbath in order to free this woman from her ailment. Healing and restoration to community are worth trampling over traditions for!

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<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 58:13b (NRSVUE)

This is not the only time Jesus will trample on doctrine and tradition to meet someone's needs. There are two similar Sabbath healings in Luke: when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in 6:6-11, he justifies his action with a question, "is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" Then in 14:1-6 we find Jesus healing a man with dropsy and then he argues, "If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well, will you not immediately pull it out on a sabbath day?"

From these examples I think we can reasonably conclude that following the Way of Christ means keeping the sabbath...but perhaps in a different way than the doctrines and traditions would have us focusing on. How we keep the sabbath matters! Followers of the Way keep sabbath by serving their neighbors. We keep sabbath by responding to people's needs. We keep sabbath by working on community and connection. We keep sabbath by re-encountering the Gospel and proclaiming it...we keep sabbath by living out the Gospel.

A reminder of Jesus' own mission statement, his summation of the Gospel he came to live out: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>4</sup> But even here Jesus is echoing Isaiah before him! Not just in quoting from it, but in his living example!

The Gospel is paramount. No other rule, tradition, doctrine, or theology has greater authority than the Gospel. And what does the Gospel proclaim? Liberation! Healing! Wholeness! How then to we best keep the sabbath? Proclaiming the liberating Gospel to a world ensnared by evil and sin. Working for the healing and well-being of all. That is our sabbath keeping, that is the Gospel we endeavor to live out. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:18-19 (NRSVUE)