

Sermon
Calvary Lutheran Church, Morro Bay, California
August 21, 2022
Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 13:10-17

Gerry Swanson was the campus pastor of California Lutheran College when Mary and I attended there as students in the mid-70s. He was and is a model of faithful life for both of us. He was winsome, careful, a great listener, passionate for justice, loving as all get-out, available. His wife Jan Bowman was equally wonderful, in similar AND different ways. Mary has her own story of how Jan led her to consider new vocations. Gerry and my Uncle Andy married us in Kingsmen Park. The party after our first, private wedding, was at Gerry and Jan's house. They remain in our minds and hearts.

Gerry and Jan had three children. The second, a son, was named Krister, after Gerry's favorite theologian, Dr. Krister Stendahl. You'll see that I'm asking you to follow this thread of love, from Gerry to Krister and beyond. Krister Stendahl grew up in Sweden, a country with a state church (Lutheran) and nominal church attendance. He says that people who actually went to church were considered to be a bit Pharisaical, if you can believe that. Too religious! Nevertheless, he sneaked in one Sunday morning, and discovered the Bible, and became enamored with it. He loved the stories, the people, the person of Jesus, whom he thought to be a perfect mixture of strength and kindness. This love led to a lifetime of study of the Bible, particularly the New Testament, for which he became famous for contrary interpretations.

Most people, up to that point, had considered Paul as a defender of orthodox faith, perhaps the pioneer of it. Rather, Stendahl said, Paul was mostly excited about who Jesus was, for us. Historically, people have seen Paul talking about who is in the church and who is out, leading to what Stendahl describes as the "undesirable side effects of beloved Scripture." He

was against using the Bible as a weapon or a cudgel. Rather, what he saw in the early church's proclamation of Jesus as the One was what he called "extravagant love language." Stendahl also became an advocate for interreligious dialogue, equality of genders, a critic of hardline defenders of Christian faith.

Stendahl was open to persuasion, also a careful listener, kind and non-judgmental, a gracious churchman, a teacher who was both loving and firm. His ideas about preaching? You'll like this. Sermons shouldn't be ponderous, labored or heavy, but rather light, quick and tender. Isn't that beautiful?

Krister Stendahl also lived most of his life with the disease called Ankylosing Spondylitis, caused by auto-immunity. His shoulders and upper back became fused. There was significant pain involved. However, he did not allow the disease to affect his life, his humor, or his ministry.

Every summer, the Stendahls vacationed on the island of Nantucket, out on the spit that forms the harbor, named Wauwinet. For many years, another family vacationed at the same time, next door. That was Mary's brother Tim Stein and his wife Jeanne Garrison and their children, Ben and Nathaniel. Tim and Krister, evidently, talked a lot. Here's the thing. Tim also suffered most of his life from Ankylosing Spondylitis. His back and shoulders were similarly affected. To turn his head, he had to turn his whole upper body. But it didn't keep him from playing tennis, or bicycling, or engaging fully in a life of the mind.

Tim was a computer geek and that was his primary occupation. I don't know all the details of what happened. Though growing up Episcopalians with the Stein family, Tim was not religious, nor observant in any way. One day, he went on a retreat, in his own words, to meet Jesus. He was in mid-life. He found some mentors, and started attending a Lutheran church

nearby. At communion time one Sunday, he went up to receive the elements, for the first time in a very long time. What he experienced at the altar rail was this – a nearly overwhelming sense of gratitude.

One thing led to another, and he ended up studying at Harvard Divinity School, where Krister Stendahl had taught. He did his Lutheran studies at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, just about the time I started working there. Mostly, besides becoming a disciple of Jesus, Tim was a protegee of Krister Stendahl, with all of his graciousness. Tim's sons, Ben and Nathaniel, were not crazy about all of this, and missed their time together while Jeanne was attending the Congregational church on Sunday mornings. When Tim recently died, people who knew him as a pastor praised his strong leadership of graceful faith, his bringing a congregation back from crisis mode, his preaching of confident trust in God's care, his being calm, attentive, loving, gentle. Like Krister. Like Gerry Swanson. Yes, like Jesus. Tim also mentored many Lutheran divinity students at Harvard, and some as interns at his congregation, aptly named Faith Lutheran Church.

Why am I speaking about Krister and Tim this morning? Because they had what some may call disabilities, similar to the woman in today's gospel. Not, apparently, as severe as hers, but significant. And in spite of what we may call their disabilities, they lived full, commendable, influential lives. And why were they able to do it? I believe it is because they saw Jesus, and Jesus saw them. Krister most powerfully saw Jesus in the gospels. Tim, you might say, most powerfully saw Jesus in the sacrament of holy communion.

One of my favorite pictures of myself was taken at the ordination of one of our friends, Carol Parmeter-Dyer. The picture is of me squatting down to talk with her son Aidan, who was maybe five at the time. I am at eye level with Aidan and listening to him, and he in his shy way

is telling me something. My glasses are perched on the edge of my nose and I am looking over them. Other robed individuals are standing around waiting for the show to begin. It's all natural and touching.

This is a little window into what Jesus does. He gets to whatever eye level we are, he comes close enough that conversation might not be necessary for communication. He looks deeply. He touches us, he shines his loving power on us. He heals us.

Jesus' words to the woman in the synagogue were "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." The word "ailment" is a translation of the word *desmos* in Greek. This word is usually translated as chain, or prison, or imprisonment. The woman was bound for eighteen years with these chains.

It's important to know, from everything I've read, that in a day before people knew biology like we do, or genetics, or other intricacies of the human body, being sick was often seen as a result of something the ill person did, or their parents did. Sickness was a sign of divine disfavor. You and I would probably have been of a similar mind if we lived in Jesus' time. So Jesus was not only healing the infirmity of the woman, he was also releasing her from the judgment of others. She could be free to be herself in worship. It is very possible that the words of praise she began shouting after her healing were those of today's Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless God's holy name!"

Katy Brochtrup was kind enough to allow me to ask her a few questions about this matter of healing. Because my two stories this morning were about two people who had a restricting condition that did not stop them from living their lives. I wanted to know if Katy was hoping or counting on Jesus to heal HER, to remove the restrictions that she lives with. And she said, No, I

don't expect Jesus to heal me. But she affirmed that she lives a full life. Though, I should say, the baclofen pump that she lives with is a bit like healing. Would you agree, Katy?

Sometimes Jesus heals by taking something away. Other times, Jesus heals by freeing us from burdens, whether physical healing takes place or not.

By the way, Jesus KNEW that doing the healing in the synagogue, on the Sabbath day, was going to get someone riled up, in this case, the local leader of that synagogue. It happened to be a Jewish context, but it could have happened at any place or time where the rules are the most important thing. In this particular instance, the interpretation of the commandment to "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" had become expansive enough that no work could be done on that day. There were thirty-nine types of work which were disallowed, including planting seed, baking, hunting, writing, building, even leading something from one domain to another. And untying knots!

The words of the synagogue leader are precious and poignant. He says, with both anger and frustration, Look, Jesus, we're not against this kind of healing, but hey, come on Sunday or Monday, all the way to Friday sunset, and I have no objection to you performing whatever kind of healing acts you want. But NOT on the SABBATH! To which Jesus points out that if it is allowed to loose the knot tying up donkey and leading it away from one place to another to allow it to drink, how much more might a knot be untied that binds a person, a daughter of the covenant?

You see, healing itself had its boundaries, according to tradition. And anyway, actual healing might not have been that common. But Jesus is saying, there is a better way, beyond boundaries. Just like he said to Martha when Mary wasn't helping in the kitchen. She has chosen a better way.

So let us not be afraid or hesitant about doing and receiving healing work. Let us know that sometimes healing is of the body and sometimes it is of the soul or spirit or mind. Let us ask and receive. Let us act AS IF Jesus has already healed us or is in the process of doing so. Let us act as if Jesus knows us well, sees us, recognizes us, understands us, and often sends us out to do such things for others. Thank you for listening. Amen.

Rev. Brian Stein-Webber August 20, 2022