

Message: Out of Control?**Do you ever feel like you’re out of control?**

I love meeting with people who are new to the worship team. No matter whether they’ve been with the church a few months or ten years, they almost always anxiously say the same thing: “Just tell me what I’m supposed to do!” The idea of God working through them in unexpected ways is a foreign concept. That is, until it happens. Let me let you in on the good news: it always happens!

No matter how seasoned we are, we may be confronted with the unexpected at what seems to be the most inappropriate time. No matter whether we’re in a church service, visiting someone, or serving in other ways, the unexpected can throw us for a loop.

A couple of years ago, I was blessed to be appointed as a local pastor. To make the schedule fit, the church made some changes, including a half-hour shift in the Sunday morning service time. I’ll never forget my first Sunday! I was halfway through the sermon when a man sitting in the front row got up and left. To say I wasn’t sure what to think is an understatement. Adding to the mystery, no one in the congregation knew why he left, either. There were a few anxious moments that week as I reflected on the message, service and situation.

On my second Sunday, the man came in late, came to the front and sat down. Halfway through the sermon, he got up and left – again! At this point, it was clear something was up. We weren’t able to contact him during the week, but I was prepared on the third Sunday. We made arrangements so that when he came in, I was waiting in the back.

I asked him if he had a moment to speak with me.

During the brief, but difficult, conversation that followed, I learned three things: first, Richard lived in a home and every Sunday he took the bus to the store and then walked over to the church. Second, the reason he left mid-way through the service was because that’s when the local bus left to take him home. Third, and most important, Richard was 95% deaf. He came and participated in the services, even though he could hardly understand anything we said or sang. Richard came because of the fellowship and connection he felt with the church.

It was a humbling moment. Here I was, concerned about how the congregation was reacting to a disruption when, in reality, I needed to praise God for the lesson on faith we were blessed to receive. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Have you ever been challenged by a situation in church, at home or in your neighborhood where you felt indignant, but weren't sure how to respond? If so, today's Scripture reading from Luke 13:10-17 offers a good lesson.

The leader of the synagogue who confronted Jesus shows an anxious response. Jesus' act of compassion shakes him up. It's outside his experience and he doesn't know what to do. Rather than trusting the teacher with the miraculous power, his pride leads him to compound his error. The leader tells the congregation that they shouldn't heal others on the Sabbath and some go along with it. He's trying to regain control, because that's what we do to be happy and handle problems. Jesus sets them all straight: this is work that's necessary to do on the Sabbath. That's how we experience God's grace.

Jesus wasn't trying to make the leader or those who followed him bad people. In fact, he spoke to the congregation, rather than challenging the person directly. Jesus was battling for the hearts and minds of the people, trying to change their way of life. Jesus was showing them the true message of God's love. God's grace will not be bound by human laws and traditions. Far too often, we make the church into a place of un-grace, rather than grace. That's why I encourage us never to be concerned about things that happen during the service. Children are not adults, they'll act like children, no matter whether it's in the service or not. We need to offer grace to them and their parents or guardians. People may speak out in different ways during the service. Whether appropriate or not, each time is an opportunity for God's love and grace to be shown. That's what Jesus teaches us through the miraculous healing of the woman.

Jesus wasn't flaunting Jewish law. He was showing the leaders and members of the congregation how it should really be lived out. After all, Jesus was the one teaching on the Sabbath! Jesus reached out to the person who had the greatest need for compassion. The woman's infirmity would have limited her ability to function normally in their

community. Because they saw illness as a reflection of sinfulness, she would have been marginalized by the leaders.

Jesus’ reference to watering oxen and donkeys on the Sabbath is a good example. Pharisaic law didn’t allow work on the Sabbath, but allowed for the watering of animals, so long as the owner didn’t hold the bucket. Yet tending to those who were in need of care and healing wasn’t allowed. In effect, they were saying the animals were more important than people. Jesus challenged them rightly. Caring for others in love is more important than any tradition.

There is also a systemic form of bias involved. Because of her infirmity and age, the woman fell into the category of those of lower status. God cares about widows, orphans and the infirm (Psalm 68:5; 41:3). The evil of Satan wasn’t just in her infirmity, but in the evil that the community did by marginalizing her. They gave her a lesser role in their community because she had less worth in their eyes. Her reduced role included their worship and service to God.

Shame was at work as well. Shaming others seldom has the effect we desire. No matter whether our intent may be good or not, the effect shame has is to challenge the self-esteem of a person. When we hear words of shame from one person, we may chalk that up to someone’s frustration. They’re having a bad day. But when we hear words of shame from more than one person, it hits our heart and mind. And, after a long time, the saddest part is that we begin to internalize that shame. We come to think we don’t deserve respect, that we aren’t worthy, that we don’t have value. The power of shame would have prevented the woman from asking for a different role or for help.

It’s no different today. In our anxiety and frustration, we marginalize others. We may not do it out of spite or with evil intentions. We do it out of self-interest. We want to be in control. We see our role as taking care of everyone else. And the only way we can do that is by being in control, telling everyone else what is right and how to act. That way, we know that our needs and wants are satisfied.

The reality is that life is different we let God take care of us. Jesus shows us the way in an extraordinary, countercultural act. Jesus sent a

message to all the people by restoring the woman to health and to her place in the community. It’s a message that’s important to us today.

Jesus didn’t just heal the woman from her ailment. He restored the woman to full status as a member of the community, equal with all others, including the men. The one in the highest position called attention to the one in the lowest position, a reversal from the norm. Jesus called her forward, where he laid hands on her. Healed instantly, she stood up straight and began to praise God. Jesus placed her in a position, posture and role normally associated with men of status and power. Jesus broke gender and culture barriers through his example of radical love.

Jesus broke the rules to show how God’s love transcends barriers and traditions humans create. In Jewish synagogues, the women sat in the back and the men in the front with the teacher in the center. Jesus called her from the lowest to the highest position, reserved for those of highest status. Men prayed to God while standing, with their eyes lifted to heaven. By healing her instantly so she stood up straight, able to look to heaven, Jesus put her in a posture reserved for those who were the head of the household. By praising God, the woman worshipped God, a role normally associated with men, particularly church leaders. Jesus called her a “daughter of Abraham,” a title of esteem which indicated that she was a descendent not only by heritage, but in spirit, which restored her worth. Jesus not only restored the woman’s health, he restored her value, her self-esteem and her standing in the community. And the response of the people was to glorify God.

The church leader wasn’t just responding to the woman’s healing. He was reacting to the shift in the culture of the church. Two parables follow our passage; the parables of the mustard seed and yeast. These are parables about the kingdom of God. In Luke 13:18-21, Jesus said, “*‘What is the kingdom of God like? And to what should I compare it? 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.’ And again he said, ‘To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.’*”

The kingdom of God is present, growing each and every day. God works through the acts of love and kindness we show to others, blessing us and those whom we serve. All that we say and do either builds others up in love and permeates our community as a refreshing spirit, or it tears others down and spreads even faster and further, like a wildfire. What we say and do is shaped by what we think and feel. Don't let anxiety and the need to be in control govern us. Instead let God take care of us, filling us with peace and assurance that God is in charge. Best of all: God only wants the best for us.

Jesus shows us God's kingdom is a place where the status quo is reversed. It's a place where those who think they're in control find they have much to learn about the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. I invite you to reflect on the illusion of control and the unexpected, life-giving ways God's kingdom is at work around us every day. I pray our church will be a place of grace, not un-grace. Let's rely on God's grace to increase the vitality of our churches' practical faith.

Let us pray:

Lord, thank you for loving us, your children, without bounds. Give us the boldness to speak in your name, to offer your love to a world that is lonely and in need of hope. Help us to follow you as disciples and be transformed by your love so we may bless others with that same love. Bless us with generous spirits, without fear of scarcity. We devote our lives to you in faith and in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Psalm 71:1-6 (NRSV)

In you, O LORD, I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame.

In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me and save me.

Be to me a rock of refuge,
a strong fortress, to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.

Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel.

For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.

Upon you I have leaned from my birth;
it was you who took me from my mother’s womb.

My praise is continually of you.

Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 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.” 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 away to give it water? 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?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.