



**Sermon preached by Bishop Sharma Nithyanandham
on 21st August 2022**

Readings: : Isaiah 58:9b- 14; Psalm 103:1-8' Hebrews 12:18-29;
Luke 13:10-17

First: On behalf of the Diocese of Vellore, I greet each one of you in the name of our Triune God – Our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. At the very outset, I praise God Almighty for protecting us and keeping us safe thus far. I am grateful to God for giving me and my wife Mrs. Jessie Sophia this wonderful opportunity to join you and to glorify God's name on this Sunday at Downing Place United Reformed Church.

At this juncture, I express my heartfelt sincere thanks to the Minister of the Church, Revd. Nigel Uden for his kind warmth and hospitality especially for giving us this unique and blessed opportunity. I am extremely humbled, yet honoured at the same time to share the word of God. I am happy to see some of the friends from India. Good to see you all.

As you are aware, we have come from India to attend the 15th Lambeth Conference. Indeed, the 15th Lambeth Conference serves as an eye opener. We thank the organizers of the Conference, especially we register our special thanks to the Archbishop of Canterbury – The Most Revd. Justin Welby.

For today's devotion, the texts that have been read to us were: Isaiah 58:9b- 14, Psalm 103:1-8, Hebrews 12:18-29 and Luke 13:10-17. Owing to time constraint, I have chosen the text : Luke 13:10-17. I have captioned my sermon as 'A Call to Imitate Jesus Christ'.

Let us look to God in prayer -

Our loving Heavenly Parent, we thank you for giving us yet another opportunity to come into your presence and worship you in one accord. As we are mediating upon your life giving word, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Luke 13:10-17, is a familiar text to us. Here, we see Jesus healing a woman, who was crippled by a spirit for 18 years. In the beginning of the passage, we hear that Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. Synagogues were worship places, where people met to discuss Scripture, talk, pray, argue, share information and sing. Visitors were welcome. Sacrifices were not offered. There might be a leader of the synagogue, but any man who could read, who knew the Scriptures, and was respected by the community, could be a speaker. Thus we see Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, on the Sabbath.

We could see that this is the last time we ever hear of Jesus being in a synagogue. It is clear that by this time the authorities were watching every action of his, and waiting to seize upon him, whenever they got a chance. Jesus spoke from the middle of the room, reading the Scriptures and offered comments; then there was a discussion of the text he had read. Later, we see Jesus healing a woman who had not been able to straighten her bent body for eighteen years; and then the leader of the synagogue intervened. He had no courage even to speak directly to Jesus. He addressed his protest to the waiting people, although it was meant for Jesus. Jesus had healed the woman on the Sabbath; technically healing was work; and, therefore he had broken the Sabbath. The religious leaders of Jesus' time abhorred cruelty to dumb animals and, even on the Sabbath, it was perfectly legal to release animals from their stalls and water them. For which Jesus demanded, "If you can loose an

animal from a stall and water him on the Sabbath day, surely it is right in the sight of God to loose this poor woman from her infirmity." From this text, I want to reflect on three important things which Jesus our Master had done. As his followers, we must imitate those doings in our lives.

1. A Call to notice the unnoticed.

We see Jesus was teaching, but he noticed this woman who had been crippled for eighteen years with a spinal deformity that left her body twisted. If we could say in medical terms she may have had acute arthritis. There might be many people listening to Jesus' teaching but our Master had the eyes to notice the one who usually get unnoticed by the society. He called the woman who was in the periphery to the centre of the synagogue. This was an unusual thing to do. Women usually stayed in the side area of the Synagogue, sitting on masonry benches against the wall. Jesus must have walked across and led her to the centre of the room. Similarly, we too must notice the unnoticed among us.

2. A Call to accept the unacceptable.

Here we see that the woman was crippled for 18 long years. The pain caused by her sickness must have been less when compared to the rejection she might have faced by the people around her. We know that when someone is sick, people are good at blaming ourselves for our illness. Similarly here, people around her might have thought that she was crippled because her body had been taken over by a spirit. As people in the ancient world believed these things were caused by 'spirits'. However, Jesus calls her and says that she is free from whatever had deformed her body. He touched her, and immediately she was able to straighten her body. He through his gesture by touching her – putting his hands on gave her the most needed assurance that you are healed and you are now accepted. Once she was unacceptable because of her sickness, but now she is accepted. Similarly, we must accept those who are waiting for acceptance in the society.

3. A Call to transform the unjust structure.

In Jesus' time, people were keen in following the religious laws literally, that was why when Jesus healed this woman on Sabbath, the leader of the synagogue was unhappy. That was the reason why he reminded Jesus that curing of the sick was only permitted on the Sabbath to save a life. After all, there were six other days in the week when healing could be done. The leader of the synagogue and those like him were people who loved systems more than people. They were more concerned that their own petty little laws should be observed than that a woman should be helped. But Jesus' action in this matter makes it clear that such oppressive structure must be transformed. He went against the existing religious beliefs and made it clear that Sabbath was made for humans and not humans for Sabbath.

Yes my dear friends, we are living in a wounded world, where people around us are facing many challenges in their lives. We must remember that the Sabbath involves not worship alone, but also caring for those at the bottom of the social ladder; we should respond with care for the poor, for the oppressed and for all those whom society rejects and avoids. As the 'Called out Community', we are bestowed with the responsibility to cater to the needs of these people - to listen with empathy, to speak with empathy and to act with empathy.

My beloved in Christ, I would emphatically say that the most precious gift we could give to someone is, our time and attention and acceptance. Let us strive our best to imitate our Master, to notice the unnoticed, to accept the unacceptable and to transform the unjust structure prevailing in our society for God's glory alone. Amen.

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