

*Now Jesus 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.*

*Jesus saw her, and said,
"Woman you are set free."
and when he laid his hands on her,
immediately she stood up straight
and began praising God."*

What a great thing!
How wonderful!
Eighteen long years she has been crippled,
disfigured,
unable to stand up straight.
Eighteen long years
and suddenly she appears before Jesus,
and right when he sees her,
he calls her over and heals her,
and she IMMEDIATELY stood up
and began praising God.

That sounds like church!
Everybody there must have been talking about it
on their way out the door,
headed to grandma's for Sunday dinner.

Well, everybody was talking alright.
And likely a whole bunch of them were saying good things.

But
...but the leader of the synagogue
(which is me,
if we're translating this story into our common life).
The leader of the synagogue was indignant
because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath.

He kept saying,
"There are six days on which work ought to be done;
come on those days and be cured,
and not on the sabbath day!"

He KEPT saying it.
Which gives me an image of this overly pious little priest
walking around saying,
"Hmph!
Did you see that?
Did you see?
Today is for worship!
Why can't she come tomorrow?"

It's easy to make fun of this little man.
We're in church.
We're here to worship Jesus,
so clearly we will side with him.

But is the leader of the synagogue really being unreasonable?
After all, she's been ill for eighteen long years.
What's one more day?

We cheer when the holier than thou get egg on their face,
but if we are fair to him,
he is not being altogether unreasonable.

Right...?

Wrong.

At least not according to Jesus.

Not only does Jesus heal the woman,
he openly defies the pious little man.

And this is what he says.

You hypocrite!

*You have taken the sabbath
and made of it an idol.*

*You have taken the law,
meant to bring you up alongside the Living God
and you have replaced the Living God
with a law which gives no life!*

*She came to this place,
this house of worship,
she came here for life,
and you would have her wait.*

*I say,
she is set free!*

*You have not come to something that can be touched,
a blazing fire,
and darkness and gloom,
and a tempest,
and the sound of a trumpet,
and a voice whose words made the hearers beg
that not another word be spoken to them.*

*Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said,
"I tremble with fear."*

*But you have come to Mount Zion
and to the city of the Living God.*

*You have not come to something that can be touched
...you have come to the city of the Living God.*

An idol can be touched,
can be made with our own hands.
Think of the golden calf.

A god,
little g,

a god that we make,
that we bow down to.
A god that can give no life.

This man in the synagogue,
he had made a god,
little g,
he had made an idol of the law.

The law is meant to bring us alongside God,
but this man had begun to worship the law
in place of God Almighty.

We see the same thing happen today,
among those who would read scripture literally
and without generosity.

And oh how I would love to go on from here.
How I would love to rail against those who defame God's Word
by reading it literally instead of seriously.

How satisfying that would be.

But I hear a voice in my head,
stopping me.

Not the gentle voice of my grandmother,
reminding me to be kind.

No. It is the harsh voice of Jesus
- *Hypocrite!*

For how can I rail against the idolatry of others
when I have idols enough of my own?

What about you?
What about all of us?
What idols do we have?

I read an article the other day,
citing the “leadership principles” of a Fortune 500 tech company,
principles which call for managers to have
“relentlessly high standards”
and to “deliver results.”

The company tells managers
that when they “*hit the wall*” at work,
the only solution is to “*climb the wall.*”

This same article said that a respondent
to a recent Harvard Business School survey of executives
proudly insisted,
“The 10 minutes that I give my kids at night
is one million times greater
than spending that 10 minutes at work.”
Ten minutes!

These are extreme examples,
but they are not isolated.

An acquaintance,
in a high powered field of work
started a new job at the beginning of the year.

As summer got underway he posted,
“Glad for my first day off after five months.
Excited to go on a trip with my kids.”

Five months!

Every day,
every one of us offers something upon the altar of an idol,
a little god we have made for ourselves,
a little god that somewhere down the line
we decided could get us
where we wanted to go.

I offer you no shame,
because we all do it.

I used to conflate the worship of idols
with the Egyptian gods
or the bad guys from Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.

But I've looked myself in the mirror too many times
to believe that any more.

The worship of false idols does not twist us into abhorrent shapes.
There is nothing ghastly
about the man who has sacrificed on the altar of a false god.

In fact,
we recognize our own face in his face.
Because we, too,
have made many,
many,
many offerings
to the same or similar gods.

We are not offended or put off
by the one who daily pours blood into the mouth of work
or prestige
or success.

We have endlessly done so ourselves.
Perhaps with less to show for it,
but we all do it,
all the time.

We are not put off or offended by the worship of false gods.

We only find offense in being called back to the God of Life.
The God who says,
*“put this life YOU have created on hold.
In fact, smash it to pieces.*

*Be done with this life you think you live,
in which you only pretend to live,
and take up the life that I have created for you.*

*Yes, pick up your cross.
Yes, give up everything.
And you will, at long last, LIVE.”*

Only those who are hemmed in by the satisfaction of their basic needs
can claim that their patterns don't exhibit their values.

For the rest of us,
what we do IS what we value.

Perhaps our job,
our likability,
our demonstration of competence
or the success of our children.

All are false gods
Promising not life,
but always asking for more,
sometimes, a lot more,
sometimes endlessly more,
more that will never be enough.

But it always starts with just a little more:
one more project,
one more output
one less conversation,
one more exhibition of our greatness,
one less opportunity to be a real,
that is a vulnerable
human being.

What are our idols?
How do we spend our time?
How does what we do
exhibit our values?

Are we running into church on the sabbath,
hoping to break the law and heal somebody?
Or are we sitting in the corner,
talking about how she should have just waited
one more day to get healed?

That's an easy one.
We know the *right* answer:
we're supposed to be more like Jesus.

So pick a harder one,
one a little closer to home.

Are you the generous one,
brave enough to overcome your fears,
or are you the stingy one,
that is the one gripped by fear?

Are you the forgiving one
or the recriminating one?

And on, and on, and on.

Pick one for yourself.
Pick something
that you aren't sure you would ever want to even admit out loud.

And then,
find the courage to admit it to yourself.

And it does take courage.
Smashing your idols
will feel like you are smashing your very self.

And in a sense that is what we are doing.
We are tearing down the self that we have made,
to discover the self that God had always meant us to be.

We are stumbling in,
to find rest on the sabbath,
laying all the broken pieces
down before our Lord,

until we hear him say,

You are set free!