

Shaming Jesus Is Not a Good Look  
Reading from the Old Testament: Psalm 103:1-8  
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 13:10-17

In the days before ESPN, there was Toby Charles, the British voice for German soccer. Occasionally, a number of American PBS stations would air the hour-long broadcast of *Soccer Made in Germany*, an edited highlight reel from a match in the *Bundesliga*, the iconic German professional soccer league. At the time, it was about the only access Americans had to televised soccer. Often featuring the vaunted rivalry of Bayern Munich and Monchengladbach, stars like Franz Beckenbauer and Gerd Muller would display their artistry on the pitch as the dulcet tones of Toby Charles' voice poetically described the action. Whenever there was an errant shot, an own-goal, or a putrid pass, Toby, without even raising his voice, would memorably say, "Oh, he wishes he had that one back."

"Oh, he wishes he had that one back." It became a catchphrase among my friends, used to describe everything from an errant drive on the golf course, a missed free throw, a fumbled football, a bad test score,

or a botched attempt to ask someone out. “Oh, he wishes he had that one back.” To this day, I can imagine Toby Charles up in the balcony reviewing a misplaced preposition, or an errant illustration that falls flat, whispering into his headset, “Oh, the preacher wishes he had that one back.”

I can even imagine Toby in that unidentified synagogue observing the tension rise as the synagogue leader chastises the guest teacher. How many of our teachers here would welcome the critique of another teacher in front of your students? It’s never a good look to shame Jesus.

In the 1st Century, the synagogue was a relatively new form of faith community. Its origins remain a bit murky as scholars have yet to clarify the genesis of the institution. The centrality of the synagogue to Jewish faith surged following the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple in year 70 of the Common Era. Prior to that the focus of Jewish life was the Temple and the home. Typically, First Century synagogues were centered in the larger room of a private home.

The synagogue was a place of prayer, reading of Scripture, preaching, and teaching. Sound familiar? Indeed, apart from the great Gothic cathedrals, the evolution of the Christian church has shared more affinity with the synagogue than with the Temple focused worship in place leading up and into the 1st Century.

Prayer, scripture, preaching, and teaching. There was a flexible rhythm to the gathering that made it accessible and meaningful for the congregation. Guest teachers/rabbis were often invited or given the privilege of reading from and commenting on the Scriptures. That Jesus would be teaching in a synagogue where he stopped along his journeys was thus not out of the ordinary, and while Jesus was known to draw large crowds, we are given no signs in our text that the “church ushers” had a problem calculating the attendance that day.

As with any worship gathering, there were probably some who were already waiting when the doors opened, and we know of one person who arrived after the service had begun and attempted to slip in anonymously. Little did she know that anonymous and Jesus won't fit

into a single sentence. Perhaps, the woman had forgotten the words of the treasured psalm: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up...” Before she even has the opportunity to sit down and catch the Scripture text or theme of Jesus’ teaching, she learns a life-giving truth for all people. You are never anonymous to Jesus.

Of course, that truth can be comforting and terrifying at the same time. It’s a great paradox of life that we yearn to be known but are horrified by the thought that someone may see us for what we are or as less than what we had hoped. And yet, when your presence is acknowledged as significant, as welcome, as desired, as if the gathering would be less than whole without you there, it is as if the sky opens up bright and clear and cool, and regardless of what transpires with your body, your spirit is healed at least for a moment, at least for today.

“When Jesus saw her.” Our passage could have consisted of just those four words, and it would have been enough. Occasionally, you’ll see a story or brief video of a popular athlete paying special attention to

a child, often through the work of the *Make-a-Wish Foundation*. Jerseys are presented; other athletes are introduced; the kid gets a behind the scenes glimpse of the stadium; and maybe even leads the team onto the field. Kindness abounds. It's a big deal for the recipient, a mountaintop moment for one who has endured such trauma, such pain, the exhausting treatments, the uncertainty of tomorrow. And yet, you don't have to have the stadium, the lights, the celebrity, or the swag to make that same difference in the life of someone just by seeing them, acknowledging them, welcoming them, affirming the value of them with the eyes of hospitality and grace.

“When Jesus saw her.” You know what that means. It is like the exultation of the psalmist who conveys the spirit of the exiles, realizing they have not been forgotten, but are being welcomed home. “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.”

You are never anonymous, or forgotten, or dismissed with indifference by the Lord. Jesus saw her. Jesus sees you. But there's

more here, isn't there? In seeing her, truly seeing her, Jesus saw her need and knew he could do something about it. For 18 years she had been crippled, bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.

18 years. There are some anxious parents in our church family today. They have been loading and unloading their SUVs, dropping off their kids in Boone, Cullowhee, Chapel Hill, Columbia, Raleigh. Going to college! 18 years ago, they were pulled up to the door of a hospital and loading up their minivans with flowers, cards, diapers, wipes, all those unnecessary plastic objects the hospital sends with you, and newborns so small they seemed swallowed whole by their carseats. This week those same infants were serially checking the time and texts on their phones, wondering if their parents would ever leave their dorm room. I've been here 18 years. You know what that means? There were babies I held in my arms like delicate china over at the baptismal who I would now need a stepladder to look in the eye.

18 years. It was 18 years ago that Mark Zuckerberg launched something called Facebook from his college dorm room. For 18 years

this woman couldn't appreciate a Carolina blue sky or pick out the Little Dipper in the dead of night. 18 years of pain, of not being able to enjoy a face to face conversation, of being unable to reach anything above her waist. But Jesus "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."

She stood up straight. Once again, four words that stand on their own, filled to overflowing with grace. She stood up straight. Elsewhere Jesus would say, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest ... For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." We're not just talking about physical relief here, though that itself is more than worthy of praise. What we are talking about here is someone being touched by wholeness. No skulking. No hiding. No fear of ridicule or dismissal. No fretting over whether others may look down upon you. She stood up straight. She wasn't posturing, preening, or performing. In that moment, she felt the fullness of life that comes when you know you are loved, when you

realize that the One who knows all things, has all power, holds all time in the palm of his hand, sees you, affirms your worth, values your presence, and is invested in your welfare. She stood up straight.

There is a problem with the way people use the phrase, “stand up for Jesus.” Very often, too often, it is used with the sense that Jesus needs our protection, needs us to defend him; that Jesus meek and mild isn’t strong enough to survive in this cruel world; that the crucifixion was a sign of Jesus’ weakness, and it’s up to us to not let that happen again.

That’s ridiculous. We’re talking about the Word made flesh; the embodiment of the One who threw the stars into the sky and breathed life into a pile of chemicals, setting off the greatest story ever told. Jesus doesn’t need our defense. I mean if God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pulled off the resurrection, I think you can put down the barbells and stop sharpening your debate skills. Jesus doesn’t need your defense. To stand up for Jesus is to be so filled with gratitude and overflowing with grace that sitting down or bending over would be too painful, and so you

won't sit down or bend over until that gratitude and grace can be directed to God and shared with a neighbor.

“When Jesus saw her.” “She stood up straight.” What more could someone ask from a worship service? ... Well, someone forgot their Bible but remembered their rule book. *Citizen's arrest! Citizens arrest! You can't do that.* Luke reports, “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.’”

Lord, grant me the grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed ... but, please spare me the perpetually indignant believer. I don't think I noticed until this week the words “kept saying” in the text. Kept saying. So, this wasn't one of those quiet asides, “Say, Jesus, how do you plan to spin this, you know, with the sabbath rules?” No, the synagogue stated clerk and parliamentarian kept saying, over and over to anyone and everyone in earshot. *You can't do this. He's breaking the rules. Cease and desist. Apostate alert. Swarm! Swarm!*

But, here's the thing, the synagogue leader, clipboard, whistle, rule book at the ready, is diligently and meticulously in there policing policies during worship. Wouldn't that be considered as a form of working on the Sabbath? I can promise you that when I am on vacation, I'm not sifting through the Book of Order. *Let's see, can I call a congregational meeting if the session doesn't have a quorum?* On my vacation - That's. Not. Happening. That's work. There just has to be some grace between the letter of the Law and the spirit of the Law.

Jesus once told his hearers, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." Aren't we most fully who God created us to be when we see someone's need and realize we can help with that? And isn't seeing and meeting the need of another an act of worship by itself?

"When Jesus saw her. She stood up straight." To see and to be seen. To recognize a need of someone and to meet that need. These constitute an act of Sabbath no matter what day it is. Amen.