
Tetherball and True Freedom

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 16, Year C

The first time I ever got into trouble with a religious authority was on a dusty tetherball court in Mentone, Alabama. I was 11 years old and the self-proclaimed 12 and Under tetherball champion at Camp Desoto for Girls. I practiced my sport day and night, cutting short midday swims, skipping special trips to Chattanooga to “See Rock City,” and occasionally even sneaking out of my cabin after Taps to work on my serve. There was one time, though, when neither I, nor any other camper, could play tetherball or foursquare or badminton or tennis or tiddlywinks, and that was on Sunday. Camp Desoto, you see, was a place that took the Sabbath very seriously. In addition to wearing all white clothes for chapel services and enduring a rest hour that lasted an extra 30 minutes, on Sundays, we campers were prohibited from engaging in any kind of competitive activity from sun-up to sundown. This struck me as malarky, and so, on one sweltering July afternoon when I was sure nobody was looking, I decided to thumb my nose at the rules by playing a quick game of tetherball—against myself. I was winning big when suddenly I heard an ominous rustling of bushes and the voice of one of the camp directors calling out: *What are you doing? It’s Sunday! Stop! What would Jesus say?*

Now, normally, I wouldn’t have had a clue. I wouldn’t have a clue what Jesus might say. Like a lot of kids, I went to Sunday School mostly for the donuts. As luck would have it, though, just before leaving for camp, I had helped my best friend, a devout Southern Baptist, prepare for a competition in which she was going to have to locate and read aloud random passages from the Bible faster than her opponents. “Mark 2:27!” I shouted triumphantly in the direction of the rustling bushes. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath! Jesus said that! I saw it in my friend’s Bible!” *Hmmmmph*. The camp director emerged, smirking, from behind a row of hollyhocks. “Well, I guess he did say that.” She started to leave, then stopped, looked back at me, and observed, “You’re kind of a handful, aren’t you?”

One might think this is what’s going on in this morning’s gospel lesson—that Jesus is just being a handful, that he’s acting as a kind of theological provocateur, seeing what he can get away with. That when he heals the stooped over woman on the Sabbath, upsetting the religious authorities with his flouting of the law, he is simply stirring up trouble for trouble’s sake. After all, the woman in question is not experiencing a medical emergency. She’s been shuffling around all bent over for 18 years; what’s one more day? Why doesn’t Jesus simply wait until a less controversial time to help her?

This is actually a pattern, though, with Jesus—that he doesn’t wait. That he heals during the off season, when conditions are not favorable and no one’s expecting much of anything. That he heals on the Sabbath and on every other day as well. When the tetherball court is open and when it’s closed; when you’ve been working your program diligently and when you’ve fallen off the wagon completely. Jesus saves and delivers and restores when and where he will without worrying about whether the timing seems right or whom he may offend. There’s this relentless sense of urgency to Jesus and his ministry. What was it he said in last Sunday’s gospel? “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is accomplished!” Jesus is like a man on a mission—which, of course, he is. He announces this quite plainly the first time he teaches in his hometown synagogue:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.

It is Jesus’ relentless quest to live out this purpose that brings him into conflict with the powers that be, both sacred and secular. It is his refusal to put anyone’s liberation on hold, to ignore those whom society deems expendable—it is these things that lead Jesus, again and again, to do things that are simultaneously life-giving and earth shattering, both restorative and disruptive, things like interrupting the sermon to heal a woman on the

Sabbath and eating with tax collectors and sinners.

This is Jesus' great mission, and his determination to pursue it exacts a toll. The authorities lose their tempers. John the Baptist loses his head. Other people, though, lose their chains. They lose their fear. They lose their shame. They lose their loneliness, their isolation, their sense of unworthiness. They lose that stooped over way of walking that prevents them from turning their face toward the warm sun or seeing a hand stretched out to help them.

And so Jesus persists. Not because he is trying to be difficult or because he doesn't think the Sabbath is important—"I came not to abolish the law," he reminds his followers, "but to fulfill it." Jesus persists because this is precisely the work he has been sent out to do, to set our broken and troubled world free. To set you free. To set me free. To set them free. Them—those people we have all but given up on, including, sometimes, ourselves. Have you ever been there? Wanting to give up on yourself, even on life, completely? I have. I have been there. But Jesus did not give up on me, and he will not give up on you either. He will keep working to release you. In spite of the hecklers in the back of the room complaining that he's doing it all wrong. In spite of the hecklers inside your own head telling you that you do not deserve such love.

And do you know what the greatest part of it all is? The greatest part of it all is that once you are truly free, you can never again be bound. "If the Son sets you free," Jesus promises, "you will be free indeed." And the gates of hell will not prevail against you. Nor will cancer or broken relationships or depression or financial ruin or bullies in the lunchroom or military tanks in the streets or the loss of everything you suppose you could never live without. You will be free indeed. And nothing—and no one—can ever take that freedom away.

Friends, this is what it is like to have your life disrupted by Jesus. This surely is what it was like for the woman who trudged into the synagogue crooked and crouched but danced out straight and tall and full of joy. I wonder what you know of such disruption? I wonder what you might like to know. I wonder how Jesus longs to set you free?