

# In the Open Air

*Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 22 August 2010, at Eagle's Crest picnic ground for the parish picnic of Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis.  
Scripture reading: Luke 13:10-17.*

Here we are in the open air, worshipping outdoors in a church without walls. Being here reminds me of this fun, if not quite “ecclesiastically correct,” Emily Dickinson poem:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church—  
I keep it, staying at Home—  
With a Bobolink for a Chorister—  
And an Orchard, for a Dome—

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice—  
I just wear my Wings—  
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,  
Our little Sexton—sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman—  
And the sermon is never long,  
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last—  
I'm going, all along.

There is something heavenly about being out here in the open air, even if it's not exactly “home” at Trinity. Still, we can catch heavenly glimpses right here in the gospel story we just heard, which is all about Jesus opening things up.

He heals a woman who's been bent over and crippled for eighteen years. He tells her, simply, “You're free!” Anybody would feel free if released from an infirmity like hers.

But as usual in stories involving Jesus and healing, more is going on that meets the eye and ear. First off, there's the blatant hypocrisy he points out. Rabbinic regulations allow for the care of animals on the Sabbath; but what sense does it make to be more merciful on the Sabbath to a beast than to a fellow human being?

On a less obvious level, too, Jesus' healing of this woman is a comprehensive symbol of his spirit opening things up. In the paraphrased translation of

the gospel we heard this morning, Jesus protests, “So why isn't it all right for me” to heal this woman on the Sabbath? That “why isn't it all right” phrase has the same meaning as if he'd stated outright that it was indeed *necessary* to heal her on the Sabbath. And in fact the very word the gospel writer has him using to emphasize how necessary is for him to heal her on the Sabbath is the same word he used a few chapters earlier when he was telling how necessary it will be for him to go to the cross, to suffer and die so our whole broken world can ultimately and comprehensively be healed.

So, why does Jesus feel the *necessity* of this particular healing on the Sabbath?

The Sabbath, you see, has always been for Jews the day God gave for rest from the bondage of day-to-day labors. The Sabbath has also been symbolic of God's promise of the day when God's kingdom would come in its fullness; when the messiah would liberate every oppressed person, bring final release from all the bondages of this world. So what better day for Jesus to heal this woman than on the Sabbath, the definitive day of liberation?

This focused story of one woman's healing, then, can stand for us a symbol, a touchstone for all the ways God seeks to liberate us, for all the ways the spirit of Jesus can work through us—so that we can be instruments of God's peace, ourselves healers and liberators. This is just as much a story about how the spirit of Jesus can open things up through *us* as through him. And there are all kinds of ways he can work through us.

There are the great ways. The fall of the Berlin wall twenty-one years ago was the result of a protest movement inspired in large part by East German churches. The center of that movement was St. Nicholas Church in Leipzig. Prayers for the fall of the wall were held at St. Nicholas every Monday. A month before the wall toppled, seventy-thousand

people showed up for those Monday prayers. Seventy-thousand paraded through the streets holding candles and chanting, “We are the people.”  
[*Christian Century*, 12/1/09]

There are also the humble ways the spirit of Jesus can open things up for us. Sometimes even the littlest expression of respect for someone who’s downtrodden can open up a world of fresh possibility. Do you know why Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu decided to become a clergyman? The first spark of that possibility came to life one day when he was a little boy walking down the sidewalk in Apartheid South Africa. A white Anglican clergyman walking the other way tipped his hat to Tutu’s black mother—and that kind of respect was just never shown by a white man to a black woman in Apartheid South Africa.

There are all kinds of humble ways you and I can open things up even now. I once heard about a janitor working late in a business office one night. He entered the office of the over-functioning, over-wrought CEO. A conversation unfolded—it was an honest one-on-one. Ever so gently the janitor wondered aloud why this stressed-out, less-than-productive executive wasn’t sharing the load more with his able colleagues. That janitor planted a seed. And from that seed, over time, the CEO loosened his tight grip, and opened up fresh and exciting opportunities for colleagues, eventually transforming the whole culture of that business.

One last thought to contemplate: You can look around you and see this spirit of Jesus, opening things up, even in the complex fabric of nature.

I started out with Emily Dickinson’s “Bobolink for a Chorister”; let me close with an observation of birds published by the naturalist Loren Eiseley in his book *Nature and Autobiography* [chapter: The Judgment of the Birds].

Eiseley had just “come over a mountain [after] slogg[ing] through fern and pine needles for half a long day.” He “sat down to rest with [his] back against a stump” and fell asleep. Abruptly, he awoke. He was “dimly aware of some commotion and outcry in the clearing. The light,” he remembered, “was slanting down through the pines in such a way that the glade was lit like some vast cathedral.” He watched, repulsed, as an “enormous raven” mercilessly tore apart a “red and squirming nestling.” What had awakened him, he realized, were “the outraged cries of the nestling’s parents,

who flew helplessly in circles about the clearing.” He listened as more and more birds joined in the outraged complaint—“small birds of half a dozen varieties drawn by the anguished outcries of the tiny parents.” None of them dared attack the raven. They circled, cried, and fluttered their protest at “this bird of death.” But the raven remained, unperturbed.

Then suddenly, “the sighing died.”

“It was then,” Eiseley continues, that “I saw the judgment. It was the judgment of life against death.... For in the midst of protest, they forgot the violence. There, in that clearing, the crystal note of a song sparrow lifted hesitantly in the hush. And finally, after painful fluttering, another took the song, and then another, the song passing from one bird to another, doubtfully at first.... Till suddenly they took heart and sang from many throats joyously together as birds are known to sing. They sang because life is sweet and sunlight beautiful. They sang under the brooding shadow of the raven. In simple truth they had forgotten the raven, for they were the singers of life, and not of death.”

In humble as well as great ways, you and I, too, can be singers of life.

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