

Duh!
Luke 13:10-17
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Duh! It's about the only thing you can really say about this passage. Duh! Of course it is right for Jesus to heal a woman on the Sabbath. Duh! What kind of a moron would object to alleviating suffering simply because it was the wrong day of the week! Duh! I think I may already have told you about the time I realized, at the ripe old age of thirty, that whereas general anesthesia was the kind they used to put you under completely before surgery, local anesthesia refers not to the type of anesthetic used in each geographic locality, but is in fact, where the anesthetic is applied locally to the body. Hey, it seemed perfectly logical to me. The folks at the Mayo Clinic use what is customary in Minnesota and the doctors in West Virginia use the venom of snakes or whatever else is used in West Virginia. Duh! I'm sure that each of us has had a few "duh!" moments in our lives, and I would imagine that as the leader of the synagogue went home later and told his wife what happened, she probably joined with us in giving him that universal sign: "duh!" But even though he has rightly deserved "duh!" as an epitaph on his headstone, let us at least give him the courtesy of learning the real reason why he deserves it.

And so, to be fair to the leader of the synagogue, let's see what might have been going through his mind that day. To begin with, we must remember that he was one of the people whose responsibility it was to interpret the law and to let

people know what the law instructed them to do. To him, this would have been a sacred responsibility, his way of preserving for generations to come the ways God had given the people of Israel to approach God and to treat one another. Truly, it was his solemn duty to correct people when they erred, but he would have been doing so more out of the greatest respect for God and God's commandments than out of duty, for keeping the law was, after all, the way in which the people of Israel responded to the grace of God who rescued them from Egypt, who gave them the land of Canaan, who established forever a descendent of David on the throne of Israel. The denial of healing for this withered woman was no mere act of arrogant cruelty on the part of the leader of this synagogue, and to portray him so would do him a great injustice. When Luke tells us that this leader was indignant because Jesus cured on the Sabbath, it is reasonable to assume that his indignation stemmed more from the fact that Jesus seemed to be flaunting the law the leader both loves and is charged with upholding, than because he was an evil man intent upon keeping a woman from being healed for the sake of the letter of the law. The real villain for him is Jesus, not the poor woman.

Indeed, the leader of the synagogue does not seek to prevent the healing, only healing on the Sabbath, the day set aside by God from the very beginning for rest. This woman need only add to her eighteen years the few more hours until the sun was down, for the Jewish day ended at sundown, and then there would be no problem with Jesus healing her. If Jesus just would have been a little more patient,

there would have been no incident at all. You see, it does us no good at all to make a caricature of this leader of the synagogue as someone one who valued the law more than life. Indeed, he knows very well that the law gives life, and presumably he is seeking to help all the people in his charge to maintain the holiness in which their life is found. For him to do otherwise is to lead them into sin. He probably even knew the law so well that he himself could have made the very same interpretation that Jesus did, if he had thought about it for a few moments or if Jesus had asked him what he thought, for it truly is a no-brainer, even under a strict interpretation of Jewish law. Far from being religiously narrow-minded then, the gentleman in question is, in fact, quite virtuous.

So if he is in fact simply virtuous and not ignorant, wherein lies the “Duh!” and what is the reason the passage concludes by saying he was “put to shame” along with the other opponents of Jesus? Well, virtue, admirable as it may be, is not without its faults, chief among them, the tendency to increasingly place virtue above the more important things in life, like compassion or justice or mercy. You’ve may have heard marijuana described as a so-called “gateway drug,” one that leads the user into harder and more addictive substances? Well, unrestrained virtue can be a gateway personality trait, one that leads to harder and more addictive attitudes like pride and arrogance. In this case, as Jesus heals the woman, the leader of the synagogue stops being worried about God’s glory and starts to become worried about his reputation. What will happen to him if lawbreakers are

tolerated under his watch, in his synagogue? What will the leaders of the other synagogues whisper about him behind his back about what has taken place over there? Will he be ousted from his position by the rank and file when his credibility takes a hit? His virtue has now been extended beyond its original intent, to interpret and defend the law, extended to include interpreting and defending himself, to keep himself from being seen as an illegitimate leader, the kind he no doubt considers Jesus to be. You see, if it had only been a matter of Jesus sinning, there would have been no need for the leader to address the crowd, for it is to the crowd he says, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, not on the Sabbath day.” By speaking to the crowd, the leader admits that Jesus is beyond his control, that this is a boundary Jesus will not respect, and so he is seeking to control those he still can. If he can prevent others from seeking Jesus on the Sabbath, then he can prevent Jesus from healing on the Sabbath, and the problem will go away. No one will then criticize him, or laugh at him, or threaten his position. If it had only been a matter of Jesus sinning, he could have let God and Jesus work that out between themselves. But instead, his self-preservation mode has kicked in and he steps in to try to keep the situation from getting any worse. Jesus calls him a hypocrite not because he wrongly applies the law but because he tried to use the law for his own benefit and not for *all* of those for whom it was intended. He is called a hypocrite because it is more important for him to celebrate his authority and his knowledge of the law than to celebrate that a

woman has been healed of an illness that has afflicted her for eighteen years. He is called a hypocrite because he cannot admit that he may have made a mistake in his interpretation of the law. He is called a hypocrite because even in the face of the obvious, a “Duh!” moment if there ever was one, he could not sacrifice his virtue for the sake of his humanity and other people’s well-being. But he is hardly alone.

For those of you who have not recently read to your children or grandchildren the Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale about the Emperor’s new clothes, and for those of you, like me, who have forgotten some of the more important details, allow me to reacquaint you by summarizing the story. It seems that two scoundrels heard about the amazing vanity of a certain Emperor and decided to take advantage of it. They introduce themselves at the gates of the palace as two very good tailors who are able to weave a cloth made with silk and spun gold so beautiful and light and fine that it looks invisible. They tell the Emperor that, as a matter of fact, it *is* invisible to anyone who is, in the words of Mr. Anderson himself, “too stupid and incompetent” to appreciate its quality.

The Emperor decides to give it a try and the two men start to work with a little cash advance from the Emperor. After a while, the Emperor sends the Prime Minister to check on the progress and the latter gentleman is dismayed to be able to see nothing. Concerned that he may lose his position if he is found to be stupid and incompetent, for that is the condition of those who cannot see the fabric, he reports back that all is well.

Finally, the day comes when the fabric is to be presented to the Emperor so that he may be fitted for his new suit. But just like the Prime Minister, neither can he see the fabric and so he panics, for he does not want to be discovered as stupid and incompetent. But when he realizes that no one could know that he cannot see the fabric, he feels better. Nobody could find out he is stupid and incompetent. Of course, everybody else around him thought and did the very same thing. So he too goes along and declares what a fine fabric it is and how happy he will be to wear the new garment.

Word has spread in the empire that the Emperor has ordered new clothing of fantastic quality and a clamor arises for the Emperor to exhibit his new duds. So a parade is formed, the Emperor dons his new clothing knowing that now he will be able to discern those in his Kingdom who are stupid and incompetent. As he passes by, the praise for his wardrobe is lavish, because no one wishes to reveal to his or her neighbor their stupidity and incompetence. The ruse continues.

A child, however, who had no important job and could only see things as his eyes showed them to him, went up to the carriage. “The Emperor is naked,” he said. By the time his father had reprimanded him and taken him away from the parade, the boy’s remark, which had been heard by the bystanders, was repeated over and over again until everyone cried:

“The boy is right! The Emperor is naked! It’s true!”

The poor Emperor realized that the people were right but could not admit to

that. He thought it better to continue the procession under the illusion that anyone who couldn't see his clothes was either stupid or incompetent. And he stood stiffly on his carriage, while behind him a page held his imaginary mantle. The End.

One cannot help but wonder if Hans Christian Anderson had our passage from Luke in mind as he wrote this famous story, for surely the child is almost too much like Jesus who rips away the illusion the crowd, or at least the leader of the synagogue, is under. Any fool could see that this daughter of Abraham, this inheritor of a divine promise, is better than an ox or a donkey who gets untied on the day of rest and that she deserved a better fate especially on the Sabbath. But like the Emperor who chose to remain on display in his birthday suit even in the light of the truth, the leader of the synagogue defends his position of authority to the end, and as Luke tells us, was put to shame.

Is vanity a mortal sin? No. Is virtue taken to an extreme the end of the world? Probably not, unless you happen to have been suffering for eighteen years with the same ailment, and someone else's hyperactive virtue runs the risk of keeping you that way for the rest of your life. Religious virtue, no matter how sincere, must always leave room for humility and humanity, for imagination, for learning something new, for laughing at one's own foibles, for experiencing God's glory even when it doesn't look like we thought it would, but most of all for the truth that it too can be a source of hurt and pain to others if we are not careful. Face-saving self-delusion may not be a sin in and of itself, but letting it become an

obstacle to the shalom of others puts it in another category entirely. There are so many ironies in this story, not least of which is that the grace the leader of the synagogue was trying to put off until tomorrow for the sake of saving face, was the grace that would have forgiven him for allowing a law to be broken under his watch, in his own synagogue.

Where is all this true in your own life? Where would a simple, if difficult, admission of guilt save you from being called a hypocrite? Where are you gatekeeping grace and truth? Have you shut down a new idea at work because it wasn't yours first? Have you discouraged a child from exercising his or her gift because of your own fears of not being able to control it? Have you written off as frivolous someone else's religious experience because you've never experienced it yourself? Have you failed to challenge injustice where you've seen it for fear of being cast out of your family, your church, your clique, the in-group it has taken you so long to get into? And when you've been confronted with your hypocrisy in situations such as these, have you made amends? Have you apologized? Or have you continued to parade naked through the situation with the train of your invisible mantle held high?

In our story today, the leader of the synagogue had enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be make him act like a human being. As a result, his religion drove him away from the woman rather than toward her. In our common life, we too have enough religion to be virtuous, but do we have enough courage to

name stupidity and incompetence when it is paraded in front of us, to decry discrimination and injustice when they are flaunted, to challenge discourtesy and disrespect when they become the order of the day? Friends, when we do those things, when we have that courage, then the faith that God gives us draws us closer to one another, helps us to see and alleviate suffering, moves us in the direction of rejoicing at all the wonderful things Jesus was and is doing, just like the crowd at the end of our story did when they could do nothing else but stand there and say “duh!” May God grant us a faith that enables us to embrace our humanity and not just our individual interests, a faith that enables us to be open to those around us who suffer, and a faith that celebrates when a son or daughter of Abraham is touched by the hearts, hands, and voices given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.