

CAGED
[written oral form]

Luke 13:10-17
Proper 16, Year C

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Gordon Allaby

Ellsworth Kansas, population 3,000, has a small archaic zoo. As was common, years ago, the animals are kept in small, barred cages.

The cage for the lone majestic grizzly bear was about 15 feet by 30 feet with a concrete floor and heavy steel bars.

His world was very small.

When I was there, the bedraggled bear paced endlessly back and forth in the 40 degree heat; his eyes starred out at forgotten dreams, as teenage boys taunted him.

Back and forth he went – on his journey of dying.

It was a pitifully sad sight to see. I hope the zoo is now closed.

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Putting animals in cages for our own amusement is a destructive human behaviour. I suppose we believe that we are entitled to control animals, yet....at what cost?

Even in regard to pets, we must assess our values and principles.

True, most pets have been domesticated, and are fine under our control. Still,... it is good to consider all aspects of how such confinement affects us and the world. Life is complex.

Ron Sider, in his book "Rich Christians", reported that 1/4 of all tuna caught goes into cat food. We have a cat. Life is complex.

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There are many different types of cages, including walled fortresses.

Sometimes we are glad to be in a cage, such as a shark observing cage.

Nevertheless, all cages confine, restrict and alter our perception of life.

The "sense" of security and safety of a cage can come at a very high cost.

The loss of nature's true vibrancy, of freedom, of choice and of consequences may lure us into complacency, apathy and dread.

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Long term prisoners are often afraid and unprepared when released.

That was the beauty of allowing prisoners to work with animals on a farm setting. They were able to engage outside the bars—interacting with natural forces and uncertainty. The previous government cancelled that program; however, it is being reinstated.

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Confinement behind walls / in cages can make us afraid of change, afraid to risk, and afraid of the many wonders and hazards of freedom.

Being under control or even controlling our situation distorts our perceptions. It hides complex issues, and gives the illusion of certainty in an uncertain world.

Living in a cage will hold us down and makes us afraid to be whole.

The Luke text addresses this issue.

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As I said, there are all sorts of cages: some are subtle, even porous, and some are very confining and destructive. Moreover, most of our cages are intangible—not made of concrete and steel.

A closed, homogenous community or culture can be a cage.

Our need for financial security can be a cage.

Relying on brute force, such as the military, for protection is a cage.

Poverty is a cage,..... as is hoarding wealth.

More often than not, we build our own cages.

What usually happens is we slowly entrap ourselves in a cage we construct with poor choices, fear, ignorance, bad luck, bad theology and....the simple, base desire to protect and rationalize our inward focussed existence.

A life of gathering inward, for whatever reason, serves to build a hubristic, eclectic pile that forms the walls of self imprisonment.

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There are tell tale symptoms / characteristics of cage dwellers, including neurotic, even psychotic behaviours, such as the grizzly bear's pacing back and forth.

The world will appear dark and threatening to the entrapped spirit.

Xenophobia and the unwillingness to embrace change is another trait.

Captivity can make a person obsessive/ compulsive—where controlling routines, conditions and behaviour, including the behaviour of others, is essential.

There is a need to control and manipulate life / living.

People in such a state tend to judge, belittle and condemn others not like themselves. *Everyone else must be wrong in order for the little world in a cage to be tolerable,....* and tolerable is rarely felt.

In addition, caged people frequently strive to cage / entrap others, too. Those in power are very good at enslaving the weak.

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In time, the body reflects the anaemic soul.... causing the shoulders to curl in—an instinctive defensive response to fear. The stance bends over, and not just from aging. Frowns on the face grow pronounced, and the eyes.... THE EYES..... have no spark.

Ultimately, the glow of hope can completely disappear.

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Many things can cripple the body, yet nothing cripples both body and soul .... so thoroughly as being trapped in a cage.

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In the latter stages of Jesus' ministry, he rarely taught in the synagogue, so this occasion stands out. Still, known teachers were often invited to speak.

As Jesus was presenting the Sabbath lesson, he noticed a woman whose body was severely bent over. The woman had been in bondage from a “crippling spirit” for 18 years.

When Jesus saw her, he called her to him.... so that he could heal her. This was most unusual. She likely attended there regularly. Being singled out was not normal. This was a surprise.

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Please keep in mind, that she is a symbol, and not the focus in the story. She represents the burden / the cost of confinement. She bears the visual consequences of being trapped.

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Jesus told the enslaved woman, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment” – the bars of your cage are gone.

Then,....He touched her.  
A compassionate touch from outside the cage to a receptive captive is powerful, very powerful indeed.

The woman immediately rose in stature..... and confidence. She was no longer afraid of the rules. She—an uninvited woman—spoke out during the Sabbath synagogue lesson. She sang out her praise for God.....for all to hear...!  
Her spirit was set free; SHE was empowered.  
She broke the confining rules and loudly spoke out!

And Suddenly, the status quo palisade / the walls of conformity began to crack.

Quickly the leader of the synagogue, a layman, sought to mend the breach. Homeostasis / *the way we've always done things* had to be defended..... because.... any deviation leads to the “slippery slope” – Rules / expectations must be kept or there will be discomfort with uncertainty.... .....choices would then have to be debated,... individuals will start thinking on their own.... Control would be lost....and... where would the people find comfort and safety?

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Calling the people back into the cage, the leader yelled out, “WE have six days to do work, come back on one of those days to be cured, and NOT today / not now. Good grief, we are in the middle of doing what we always do on the Sabbath. Please get back into your cage and comply.

Take note of what he said, and notice that the leader did NOT address Jesus, his obvious adversary in the story.

He spoke to the crowd, not Jesus.

He knew that the thoughts / opinions of the crowd needed to be restrained.

Apparently, the conformity of the people was more important than healing, even in the presence of divine healing.

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Perhaps, pacing back and forth / doing the same again and again is predictable and certain,..... *and so is death.*

Jesus counters to everyone present, citing that they take the time / the work to free their animals on the Sabbath so that the animals can have access to water. Jesus argued that they don't allow their own possessions to suffer and be weakened, so why should the woman's suffering / bondage be ignored?

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His opponents felt the unease of losing an argument.
Everyone else rejoiced at the amazing thing Jesus did.
Yet, the story doesn't mention anyone else being healed.
//// I don't think they understood.

I think they were more "wowed" by the physical aspects / the supernatural instead of the natural.
Yet, Jesus was not doing a card trick with the crippled woman's life.

I don't think they got the point of the message / the lesson in the story.
I don't believe they grasped how healing happens / how salvation comes about.
It seems that they failed to appreciate the way of Christ / the nature of God, and the wonder of freedom.

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This story is not in Luke's account to impress us with magical, curative powers.  
This episode in the synagogue is Not really about physical change, but rather about the spiritual.  
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Life is messy, complex and frequently unfair.
It wasn't fair that the woman was healed. Did she deserve it more than others?

It wasn't fair that the divine showed up during a worship service and disrupted all rituals and expectations with a woman praising out loud.
How do we pigeonhole this?

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A rush to determine right and wrong is likely closing the door to our cage. Most people want predictability, and a clear and simple answer. There is sense of security in a closed cage /with rigid answers.

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Life is messy, and simple right and wrong / black and white answers do not always cleanly mesh with righteousness and justice.

Is Jody and Jane right.... or Justin.... or Andrew..... Or, maybe it's all gray with tones of goodness and nefariousness? ???

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Life is messy and ....fascinating.

For example, rich nutritious soil is full of death, dying with enzymes and bacteria, yet produces wonderful plants.

A brilliant child may perform poorly in academic classes, yet soar in the creative arts,.... when set free.  
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Being contained to a prescribed way will not bring joy and wholeness. We are all different and experience different unfolding events differently. And from a cage, that doesn't look fair.

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The woman and the surprise encounter with the divine, represents how healing is found. Being open to a divine touch will allow us to be free.

And, please notice the touch.  
More often than not, people are not freed / not healed by sound reasoning or hard, cold facts.  
Being present, compassionate with a loving touch is far more powerful.  
May we be healing instruments for God.  
May we show grace and not judgment.

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Then there is the synagogue leader.
Jesus did not touch him,.....and that does not seem fair.

We could inject that he was not open, and that would make sense.

Regardless, he is in the story to expose the cage.
He is a symbol of a closed, controlling system that wasn't working, and was even destructive to others.

The woman was a symbol of redemption, empowerment and freedom.

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There may come a time when we see that our paradigm does Not work.

There may come a surprise, be it a new insight or outside challenge or a tragedy that forces us to rethink our reality.

There may come a touch from God that reveals the bars we have placed around ourselves, and that only grace can set us free.
That is grace from God,..... and being gracious to our own fallibility.

Grace must be received to be grace.

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When the world around feels very scary and unnerving, may we take that as a prompt to assess our values.

If our foundation is not on God, if we are not truly trusting God, then we better build walls and get in a cage.  
Because life is messy and dangerous with uncertainty.

What is giving us courage....and hope?