

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

I've never had a pie thrown at me before. I can tell that some of you are surprised that I am willing to do it. Well, let me assure you, I'm not. Not very willing but I guess it is going to happen.

The other morning it occurred to me that I am doing this for nothing. No one will be paying any money to aim a pie at my face. We ought to at least be getting a few dollars for the building fund or for Aids victims in Africa or for choir music. But no – Pastor Eileen and I are offering our faces as targets for free. I hope you enjoy this.

But the truth is: If it means that some of you will involve yourselves in ministry and service it will be worth it. If it means that some of you will begin gathering with others to study the scriptures it will be worth it. If it means that any of you will be learning about someone else and praying for one another, praying together, it will be worth it. You will be changed, the body of Christ, the church, will be built up – we will all be blessed. Taking pies in my face may have been for free but it will not have been for nothing.

In a few moments you will be asked to indicate ways in which you would want to serve in the coming year. Every mark you make will cost you something, the most precious thing you have in life – your time. You will give yourself for free – but not for nothing. Whether you sing God’s praises, or take time after a meeting to listen to a sister or brother going through a dark valley what you give for free will bring blessings to others. Maybe you will join with others to raise money for Aids orphans in Africa, maybe you will arrange for training in speaking to others about Christ, maybe you will witness to your faith in Jesus Christ through teaching Sunday School. Maybe you will be part of the group that plans this day next year, inviting people into deeper involvement in ministry. You will give yourself for free, but not for nothing.

A long time ago there were folks like us who supported a synagogue. Some of them made the candles that were lit each sabbath, others swept the floor. Some of them helped those in need, like the woman who was crippled by a back she could not straighten. Every one of them helped to make possible what happened one sabbath. The teacher Jesus was there on the sabbath, and when he saw the woman bent over he 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.

The purpose of our gathering here is that God might straighten bent lives. Candles on the altar don’t do that – committees caring for the property don’t do that – not even your or my listening to our neighbors’ troubles can do that. But God can use us and candles and clean windows to bring our neighbors and to bring strangers and even we ourselves near so that Jesus can touch lives and make people new. The church is not for our entertainment or our activity or our service but even as we are being entertained or active or serving Jesus is able to surprise us – give us faith, give us hope, give us love.

Spikenard is what Jill and her committee named this day. Spikenard is what a woman who loved Jesus poured on his head. Her gift to him was not free – the scriptures tell us that the spikenard she poured over him cost

what a man would earn with a year's labor. The disciples could not understand why so much was being used in this way.

If the woman who poured that spikenard on Jesus' head had walked bent over for eighteen years and now could stand – I could understand why she was so extravagant with Jesus. She was thankful.

Maybe it was this woman, maybe another. But Spikenard is a great image for what you do in offering yourself today.

You are saying thanks. Thank you Jesus for offering yourself for me on the cross. Thank you Jesus for walking with me day by day – hearing my prayers – sharing my hours. Thank you Jesus for forgiving me – for promising your love for me is greater than all else.

And if there is little gratitude to Jesus in your heart? Hang around where he has promised to be – suddenly you may be the bent over woman whom Jesus straightens. If she had not been in the synagogue that day – who knows?

For you who are grateful, spikenard can take many forms. Jesus said, “As you show love and give help to the least of these my sisters and brothers, you do it to me.” You won't run out of ways to show Jesus love. Food for the hungry, help for someone, caring for a loved one in her home, teaching children - the list can go on and on. Jesus receives your love poured out.

So throw your pies at the pastors – but be sure to aim at Pastor Eileen. Amen.