

“Stand Up”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
14th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16C) – 20 & 21 August 2016
Luke 13:10-17

You know, sometimes I’m jealous of Jesus, because when he saw someone suffering, like the woman at the synagogue, who had not stood up straight for eighteen years, he could fix it, just like that: instant, complete healing. I imagine many, maybe all, of us have felt the same way from time to time. What a great delight it would be to relieve pain and restore abilities long lost to injury, age, or disease.

Of course, there’s a reason why Jesus could do such wonderful things, and we cannot. He was God, and we aren’t. In fact the desire to possess that sort of power, compassionately motivated as it may be, reflects the true core of sin, which is our desire to be God instead of just being who God created us to be. And frankly, we ought to be relieved, because if you think about it, even the most amazing gift can become a source of discontent and complaint. Remember how the leader of the synagogue reacted to Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath?

If any of us were to receive the power to heal as Jesus did, we’d be overwhelmed with media coverage, inundated with desperate people needing help, and mocked by some as frauds. Yet even though we do not possess the quick, radical healing power of Jesus, there is much we can do to bring healing to others. We can follow the example Jesus set in that synagogue and help bring mercy and wholeness and freedom and peace, because through Christ, God has chosen to empower us for such wonderful things as these. But how does it work?

Well, no doubt you noticed that the woman’s inability to stand up straight was attributed to a spirit, and while that may seem odd in an age of advanced medical technology, it was normal in Jesus’ age to consider injury or illness as an outward and visible sign of an inward and

spiritual problem. Unfortunately, the person in pain was usually blamed for their sickness. The prevailing attitude was that the unhealthy must have committed a terrible, hidden sin for God to punish them so severely and publicly, and sadly, this attitude remains among some Christians to this day.

However, Jesus did not blame the woman. He did not say, “Your sins are forgiven.” Instead, Jesus said, “You are set free,” and he blamed those eighteen years of misery on Satan, the personification of all the forces of evil that strive to corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. That insight, combined with Jesus’ refusal to find fault with the woman, might have been more liberating to her than the physical healing itself.

We need that insight, if we hope to find healing for ourselves and to nurse the wounds of others. The Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind, so deeply ingrained in modern thought, is false. The truth is that we are integrated people of body, mind, and spirit: the three woven together to form a single inseparable fabric. If we hold fast to the truth that the spiritual world is real, then we can follow the example of Jesus and make a stand, so that others may stand.

We can make a stand against simplistic either/or thinking, represented so well by the leader of the synagogue who berated the crowd, insisting, “There are six days which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” Now this was an earnest man, trying to uphold the ancient Law of his people, but his interpretation of the Law lacked subtlety, imagination, mercy, or any sense of openness to newness.

So, too, we often seek peace and solace on the Sabbath, uncomfortable if not outright opposed to anything that might disturb this sought after tranquility, like discussion of justice or any suggestion that when people say they’re fine that word sometimes serves as an acronym for Fragile-Insecure-Neurotic-Emotional. The pain of our hearts and the viciousness of the world

belong on the Sabbath. What better day to bring our plea to God? What better day to be honest with God and each other? We can stand with Jesus for a Sabbath big enough to include the hurting, the hungry, the homeless, and all who are in need, and when we stand with Jesus on the Sabbath, we help other stand, too.

Like Jesus, we can make stand against the cruel oppression of forces beyond our control and make a stand for freedom from those forces. There are those who believe in spiritual warfare, and some speak of seeing angels and demons perched on roofs and tree branches. That imagery seems strange to some people, including me, but people see what they see. And it would be better to visualize supernatural beings caught up in a cosmic conflict than to deny the reality that spiritual forces exist, both good and evil; that they affect us; and that we can choose to accept the one and reject the other; and that our choices influence real outcomes. Engaging the spiritual is not an escape from reality, though some people try to use the spiritual in that way. Rather engaging the spiritual is an entry into a broader reality. Otherwise, we consent to being bystanders and victims, and none of us has time to be either one of those.

Whenever we reject force, coercion, and violence as the preferable means to solve a problem, we make a stand against cruelty, a stand for mercy. Whenever we seek to change unjust laws and structures and situations, we make a stand against oppression, a stand for freedom, so that those bent over can stand up. Whenever wisdom pierces the veil of lies, we make a stand for truth against deception. Whenever we praise God, we denounce the powers and principalities that oppose God.

Whenever we do such things, expect a mess. Expect unexpected wrinkles to appear, where everything seemed so smooth and straightforward. Expect resistance and outrage, as Jesus experienced when the leader of the synagogue voiced his protest, a complaint that seems so

mean-spirited to us now. Expect to be tempted to compromise in ways that violate the integrity of your discipleship. And most of all, expect God's help. Expect God's help, and your expectation will not be disappointed.

Any stand we make, we make solely on the strength and courage of God's grace, pouring through us. And that's an intensely important thing to understand. We tend to regard grace as a gift we receive and then keep, but that isn't how grace works. The Israelites, in their wilderness wanderings, could not keep the manna overnight, because it would spoil, a feature of manna that taught trust and reliance on God alone. So we rely on God for a constant supply of grace.

The big difference is that manna could be consumed, whereas grace cannot be. We cannot consume grace. Rather grace consumes us. As Hebrews reveals, "for indeed our God is a consuming fire." Grace is the gift we receive by giving it away, and in doing so we discover that grace is not only sufficient. It is abundant. That is how we make our stand, and there is no other way. Without God's grace pouring through our hearts, there is no hope. We stand stooped over, eyes to the ground, not on the horizon, much less on the heavens.

Of course, there are problems with grace. Some feel unworthy of it, and at some level, that's correct. No one is worthy to receive the gift of grace, but it's not about earning or deserving. It's not about US. It's about God and what God has chosen to do, deliberately, consistently, and generously. If you feel unworthy to receive grace because shame is holding you down, I want you to remember the woman who had not stood upright for eighteen years. She didn't ask Jesus for help. Nobody asked on her behalf. Jesus just saw her and healed her, and Jesus will do the same for you, releasing you from the shackles of shame and allowing you to feel the joy of being unworthy yet justified to stand before God, of being imperfect yet sanctified in His grace.

And sometimes, we fear God's grace, but we don't want to admit our fear, so we trick ourselves into believing that we cannot receive God's grace because we are unworthy for some other sensible reason. Guess what? You are right to fear God's grace, because if you let God's grace loose in your life, God only knows what might happen. You might take a stand, and court ridicule. The things you treasure now, under the influence of grace, might come to seem like trash. The truth you know in your bones might be challenged, and you'll have to make a choice between the two or go crazy. But at least you'll stand with a straight, strong spine, and your head held high.

Now I know that you'd like some practical suggestions about how to apply this in your daily life, which is natural and appropriate. Use your imagination and perceive with the eyes of faith the world about you, and you will not lack opportunities for practical application. We live in a whole world of hurt, and though we know that in the end God wins, too many victories are being gained by forces that revel in oppression, cruelty, injustice, and selfishness. And each of those victories leave people miserable, insolated, and incapacitated.

If you're looking for practical applications for daily living, consider Jesus. He didn't have to go hunting for people to heal. They came to him, because they had heard his words, or the words that others spoke of him. They felt his presence, and the presence of Jesus is alive in you. Don't cover it up. Let the light shine, and people will seek you out like a mariner seeks out the lighthouse in the storm.

Pay close attention. People who need a blessing float through your life every day. They may not know they need healing, because they've been bent over for so long they've forgotten what it means to stand up straight, but watch for them and be ready to act. Remember that the

woman didn't seek out Jesus for healing. She came to the synagogue for a Shabbat service, and Jesus reached out to her and gave so much more.

Finally, remember the victories Jesus has already won through you. Don't be falsely modest or minimize the wonders God has wrought through you. Be humble, yes, because your ministry relies on grace, not your own skill and cunning, but do not deny how God works marvelously through you. Rejoice in it. Give thanks, and praise God for it. And then once more enter the fray. Amen.