

A Bent Woman in a Crooked Room
Luke 13:10-17
Second Sunday of Lent, (Feb. 25) 2018
Kyle Childress

Shortly after the end of World War II, as the British government prepared to rebuild the bombed out Houses of Parliament, Winston Churchill said, “We build our buildings and then our buildings build us.” Churchill was reminding the British government and the British people that rebuilding their parliament buildings was not simply a function of constructing a place to meet. The kinds of structures we construct have to do with how we see ourselves and whom we yearn to be. And though we construct the buildings, over time, those structures construct us and they shape how we see and what we do and who we become.

This is true of structures as grand as the Houses of Parliament in London and it is true of the simple building in which Austin Heights meets and worships. Our building was completed in Jan. 1970 and dedicated in April 1970. Pastor Jerry Self said at the dedication, “We believe that Christianity calls for vital, intelligent, and responsible lives. We are attempting to be that kind of church, and have tried to build a building which can be used in such a dynamic ministry” (Archie McDonald, *The Amazing Grace Baptist Church: Four Decades of Service at Austin Heights*, p. 27-28).

As you can tell, it is a functional building. It is a building to be used, as Jerry Self said. We were and are a congregation that prizes “getting it done” as much as anything. Yet even this simple building has more going on than perhaps we first realize. We come into this building every Sunday morning to worship. This

building orients us. We are an orientated church. Literally, we face east, toward the rising of the sun: s-u-n, as well as the rising of the S-O-N. The word “orientation” means “turned toward the east” and it has been the tradition of churches ever since churches first started having buildings in the 4th century to try to face east because in Matthew 24:27 it says Christ will come again in the east. So we come to worship and our building helps us get our direction straight. We are literally and spiritually reoriented after a week of disorientation.

We build our buildings and our buildings build us.

At the same time, social structures build us – our stories, our myths, our movies and social media, our television, our families and family stories, our community stories, the arts, laws, education, religion, and so on are the way we make sense of who we are and who we want to become.

What if our structures are disoriented? What if they’re poorly built? What if they’re decrepit or run-down? What if they’re demeaning or what if they’re just plain cockamamie?

Perhaps some of you might remember the building at Six Flags Over Texas called the Casa Magnetica? First opened in 1962 it is still there though not always open. It is also known as the “crooked house.” The premise is that a wealthy eccentric inventor built the house to utilize magnets to make his life more comfortable. The truth is the house is built upon an illusion. It is built at an extreme angle one direction while the interior of the house is slightly slanted the other direction. Patrons walk through the house and the Six Flags workers do things like roll oranges on a downward sloping table and the oranges roll upwards,

and water flows uphill from the sink, and so on. It is all an optical illusion. I understand that other theme parks have such buildings sometimes called the Wacky Shack or something like it.

We build structures and our structures build us – for good or for bad. Standard looking structures might actually be off-kilter. They might be disorienting. A straight looking building might actually be crooked.

In her 2011 book, *Sister Citizens: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, author Melissa Harris-Perry talks about the experience of black women in our society and uses the image of a crooked room. The image comes from a psychology experiment in which research subjects were placed in an architecturally crooked room and were asked to describe their orientation. They sat in crooked chairs at crooked tables with walls that were off-center and a floor that was not square. At first the subjects noticed the crookedness of the room but over time and with the reinforcement of the researchers telling them, “No, this room is not crooked. It must be your imagination,” the subjects adjusted to the crooked room and began to consider it normal. Over time, most subjects’ posture began to change to adjust to the room. It was only after going outside the crooked room did the subjects realize they were bent over in stooped or abnormal postures. Outside it took the subjects some time to regain their proper footing and proper posture. Outside the crooked room they eventually were reoriented.

Harris-Perry says that structural racism and structural sexism are like living in a crooked room. She says that over time, women, and black women in particular, have been shaped, and misshaped by what white supremacy structure

has constructed. They even have come to believe their bent lives are normal (cited in Shirley Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, p. 85).

Jesus comes along this morning and tells us that isn't normal.

In our reading from Luke, Jesus heals a woman bent for 18 years. Luke says she was bent from a spirit. But as we've heard before a spirit or demon might mean the spirit of the system of domination that has worn her down. Perhaps she is bent over from years of living in a crooked room, working daylight to dark, from do to don't, from can to can't, picking cotton, or cleaning or washing, ironing, and pulling clothes through a mangle. On top of that she has lived in a crooked room that said she was second-class, had no rights beyond her husband, really didn't exist without her husband, and her salvation was through her husband. She sat in a designated place in worship and was told to keep quiet. She could not study under a man and her crippled condition would have been considered God's judgment on her, therefore she was to be avoided by all good and upright people.

Jesus calls her out in the synagogue. He says in front of everyone, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then Luke says, "He laid his hands on her and she immediately stood straight and began praising God" (Luke 13:12-13).

Jesus' healing, in the synagogue on the Sabbath, creates a storm of controversy. The religious leaders are outraged that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. It is soon apparent that this is not a simple event of curing someone. Something much bigger is going on. Jesus is challenging the whole crooked system, the entire distorted structure.

Her refers to the woman as a “daughter of Abraham,” which challenges the notion that women were saved through their husbands. Jesus says she is a full-fledged member of the covenant and has equal standing with men. Beyond that, when the religious leaders react with anger over his healing on the Sabbath, Jesus responds, “You hypocrites! Each and every one of you regularly unties your ox or donkey from its stall and leads it to water. So why isn’t it alright for me to untie this daughter of Abraham from the stall where Satan has had her tied for these 18 years?” (v.15-16). In other words, he is restoring the Sabbath to its original meaning of release from bondage.

By touching the woman, Jesus challenged the holiness code with its strict scruples about touching women who might be unclean or who might entice a man. By speaking to her in public, Jesus broke further laws and codes that kept women under the strict control of her husband. By calling her out in the middle of synagogue, Jesus challenged the men who controlled the synagogue and the whole notion that access to God came through men. And by asserting that Satan had bound her for these 18 years he was saying that her ailment was not the judgment of God and therefore, quit shunning her. But more, in saying her illness was not God’s punishment but satanic oppression, he was unmasking the entire Powers and Principalities/the System of Domination whose driving spirit is Satan (from Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be*, p. 70-71).

Here was a bent woman in a crooked room and Jesus not only healed her so she stood straight but he challenged the whole crooked room. No wonder the outrage from those who controlled the crooked structures and who found power in the crooked systems.

“How dare Jesus challenge us! Someone needs to shut him up. He’s no progressive. He’s a revolutionary! And who does this woman think she is?! Her job is to go along with the system. Her role is to keep quiet. How dare these women come forward and speak openly of sexual assault and abuse and harassment. How dare these women challenge the system! How dare these women bring up their painful memories and things better left in the past.”

Jesus challenges all that. Later, when Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem outside the great Temple that Herod had built, while the disciples are gawking at its magnificence, Jesus says, “The days are coming when this structure will be a pile of rubble” (Luke 21:5-6). Jesus is saying that the days are coming when crooked rooms and crooked structures will fall.

Back in Luke 5:37, Jesus says, “You can’t put new wine in old wineskins because the new wine will burst the old skins. Instead, you have to put new wine into fresh wineskins.”

In other words, the old crooked structures keep us bent and Christ calls us to stand straight and become part of new structures, new wineskins, a new community. The new community in Christ is to be the structure where we practice, practice, practice standing up straight. It’s called “church.”

I have no doubt that the woman in this story had many experiences where she felt she was being bent out of shape again. Every time a man told her to keep her mouth shut, she bent a little. Every time the system told her to sit at the back of the bus, she bent a little more. Every time she heard a demeaning putdown, an inappropriate comment, a sexual joke, a racist assumption, she bent some more.

Every time she was asked to show her I.D. Every time she was pulled over. Every time she was invited to go back to her old friends, and the old ways of abuse and violence, she was bent out of shape again.

But come Sunday she gathered with other previously bent people who had been made tall and straight by Jesus. Come Sunday she could talk about the painful memories and not be shamed. Come Sunday she could walk tall again in a straight room. Come Sunday she joined with others who could practice new habits that told them that every one was a child of God, created by God, redeemed by God and loved by God. Don't believe the old talk and don't go back to the old habits. Don't become bent again. Come Sunday their disoriented lives were reoriented in Christ.

Now I know and you know that over time in history, the new community in Christ, which is called "church," became in too many instances just another crooked room – just another old wineskin. The old men took charge and told the women to do the work but keep quiet. Bear the abuse but keep quiet. Go back to being second-class but keep quiet.

For all too long, we've all been – women and men, straight and gay – living in a crooked room in a crooked house and been told and taught to believe it was the way things were supposed to be. Well, Jesus shows up and tells us the truth. He comes and gets us oriented.

Hear me this morning: every time Jesus Christ shows up, the new wine bursts the old wineskins. Every time Jesus shows up, the crooked rooms shake and eventually come tumbling down. Every time Jesus shows up, the old Powers of Domination are called out, challenged, and defeated. Every time Jesus shows up,

people start standing tall again. Every time Jesus shows up, bent over people stand upright and say, "I ain't going to take it anymore."

[Peggy Greer stands and reads/recites]

Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that 'twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man - when I could get it - and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and yours holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my little half measure full?

Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, 'cause Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where

did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him.

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back , and get it right side up again! And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them.

Obliged to you for hearing me, and now old Sojourner ain't got nothing more to say.

[Sojourner Truth (1797-1883): *Ain't I A Woman?* Delivered 1851, Women's Convention, Akron, Ohio].

Amen! Sister Sojourner Truth.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.