

“Stand Up”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 13:10-17

Sometimes, I’m jealous of Jesus. 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. There are days when I desperately desire the ability to make it go away: cancer, dementia, Alzheimer’s, ALS, Parkinson’s, rheumatoid arthritis – you name it. And I imagine many, maybe all, of us have felt the same way from time to time. What a great joy 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. He was God, and we aren’t. In fact, the desire to possess that sort of power reflects the true core of sin, which is our desire to be God instead of just being the creatures 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, outrage and slander. 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 and empowered for wonderful things. But how does that 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 sin for God to punish them so severely, and oddly enough, this attitude still remains among some misguided people today.

However, Jesus did not blame the woman. He did not say, "Your sins are forgiven," as he sometimes does when he heals. Instead, Jesus said, "You are set free," and he blamed those eighteen years of misery on Satan, a Hebrew word that literally means "adversary," 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, of how spiritual realities shape physical realities, if we hope to find healing for ourselves and nurse the wounds of others. The Cartesian dichotomy of body and mind, so deeply ingrained in modern thought, is false. The truth is we are an 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 is real, then we can follow the example of Jesus and make a 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 on 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 any subtlety or imagination.

We, too, often seek peace and solace on the Sabbath, and feel uncomfortable if not outright opposed to the introduction anything that might disturb this sought after tranquility, like discussion of injustice or any sign that when people say they're fine that word stands 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 and ourselves? We can stand with Jesus for a Sabbath big enough to include those who hurt and hunger, the homeless, and all who are in need.

Like Jesus, we can make a stand against the forces of cruel oppression and strive to be free and to free others from that demonic power. We're not entirely comfortable with that kind of language, but we cannot deny the presence of evil forces. Engaging the spiritual is not an escape from reality, though some people try to use the spiritual in that way. Rather engaging the spiritual realm is an entry into a broader reality. Otherwise, we consent to being bystanders or victims, and followers of Jesus don't have to settle for either one of those.

Whenever we reject force, coercion, and violence as the preferable means that justify the end, we make a stand against cruelty, a stand for mercy. Whenever we seek to change unjust laws and create just laws, whenever we resist structures and situations that violate God's love, we make a stand against oppression, a stand for freedom. 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 smooth and straightforward. Expect resistance and outrage, as Jesus experienced when the leader of the synagogue voiced his protest, a complaint that seems so ridiculous and 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.

The choice we make, the stand we take, means nothing if we don't rely in faith on the strength and courage of God's grace, pouring through us. And that's an intensely important thing to remember, how grace pours through us. Sometimes, we look at grace as a gift we receive and then keep and possess, but that isn't how grace works. We rely on God for a constant supply of grace, and far from consuming it, grace consumes us, because it is the consummate blessing that completes us. Grace is the gift we receive by giving it away, and in doing so we discover that grace is not scarce or merely 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 will stand stooped over, eyes to the ground, our gaze not the horizon and certainly not on the heavens.

Of course, we have some 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, remember that woman who had not stood upright for eighteen years. She didn't ask Jesus for help. Nobody asked on her behalf. Everybody thought it was her fault, probably including her. Jesus just saw and healed her, and Jesus will do the same for us, release us from the shackles of shame and allow us to feel the joy of being unworthy yet justified, of being imperfect yet sanctified.

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 or for

some other seemingly 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, literally. You might take a stand, and court ridicule. The things you treasure now, under the influence of grace, might come to seem like trash. Long-held beliefs that you know in your bones are true 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. For Christ's sake – and I'm not using the name of the Lord in vain, because I mean this literally – for Christ's sake, 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 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, isolated, 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, other people like us. 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.

Pay attention, because 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 unprompted.

And be not afraid. Remember the victories Jesus has already won through you. Don't be falsely modest. Humble, yes, because your ministry relies on grace, but do not deny how God

has worked marvelously through you. Rejoice in it. Praise God for it. And then enter once more the fray. And if you really can't think of a single instance where you made a change in someone's life for the better, please come to talk to me, and in the meantime, reflect on what other faithful Christians have done. Be inspired, not intimidated, by their deeds, because as my grandma said whenever I felt outmatched and unable, "They put their pants on one leg at a time, just you like."

It's time for us stand up, and I mean that literally. I want everyone who can to stand, and everybody reach for the hymnal in front of you and turn to 561, because nothing stirs the human soul quite like music, nothing magnifies strength and purpose like a congregation of Christians singing as one.

If you're reading online, here are the lyrics. You can also hear it sung by accessing the video on our website. Simply scroll through to the end of the video.

Stand up, stand up, for Jesus, ye soldiers of the cross;
Lift high his royal banner, it must not suffer loss;
From victory unto victory his army shall he lead,
Till every foe is vanquished and Christ is Lord indeed.

Stand up, stand up, for Jesus; the trumpet call obey;
Forth to the mighty conflict in this his glorious day:
Ye that are his now serve him against unnumbered foes;
Let courage rise with danger, and strength to strength oppose.

Stand up, stand up, for Jesus; stand in his strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you, ye dare not trust your own:
Put on the Gospel armor, and watching unto prayer,
When duty calls or danger, be never wanting there.

Stand up, stand up, for Jesus; the strife will not be long:
This day, the noise of battle; the next, the victor's song.
To valiant hearts triumphant, a crown of life shall be;
They will the King of glory, shall reign eternally.

