

**“...and raises up all who are bowed down...”**  
**Luke 13: 10-17**

I knew a lady once, a dear lady, who spent her life in heavy, iron leg braces—the kind that went clunk, clunk when you walked, the kind that made you walk like Frankenstein in a black and white, grade “b” monster movie. She cooked and gardened and quoted Shakespeare; she was elegant and insightful and deeply spiritual. And yet, when you saw her, you saw those braces; you heard those braces. You looked away, but they remained in your mind’s eye. And she knew this. She knew how unavoidable they were. And so, because she was wise and kind, she said: “Everyone has handicaps. Some are more visible than others.” With these words, she freed you from thinking about her “handicap”. She freed you to think about your own.

This is the truth I learned from her; I will never forget it. We are all hurt and hurting. We are all disabled. We are all “bent over.” We all have something that makes us feel somehow different, sick, limited, distorted, outcast. Some of us hide it; some of us don’t. No matter. We all need Jesus to stop whatever he is doing and to see that there is something terribly wrong with us; to call us over; to speak to us, personally and directly; to hear the words he speaks just to us as others watch and listen; to feel the energy flow through his hand; to experience his touch. And we need to experience this immediately—whether it is a day when he is allowed to talk to us and touch us or not.

To the woman in our story his words are simple, direct, startling: “Woman you are set free.” And (poof!) whatever it is that caused her to be bent over for eighteen miserable years is no more. Eighteen years of looking at the ground. Eighteen years of being on the margins, on the sidelines, in

the surreal ER waiting room. 216 months of being defined by a condition, of suffering from an illness, of being held in the grip of some “spirit” that twists her up, that does her in. Month after month of being perceived as sick and weak and deformed, of feeling powerless to do anything about it. Over 6000 days of dreading morning, of struggling to put on clothes, of dealing with God knows what indignities. And just like that, it’s over; it’s over because of his words and because of his touch. “Immediately she stood up and began praising God.” Immediately. Just like that. Everything was different. Everything.

There is much about this remarkable story that demands our reflection. First, unlike so many healing stories in the Gospel, unlike the woman who reaches out to touch the hem of Jesus gown, or unlike Jairus whose daughter is dying, or unlike the paralytic who is lowered through the roof by his friends, this woman does not ask Jesus for help. The text says: “When Jesus saw her he called her over...” He saw her. He called her over. With all the miserable people he saw every day, with all the clamor and demands for healing, why her? Why her? I think the answer to that will tell us a lot not just about the woman, but also about Jesus, about who he was, and is, and about what matters the most to him.

Next, we must ask, why then? Jesus is busy teaching. Why stop? It is the Sabbath. Why that very moment, that very day? Students of Scripture will realize that, as soon as we read that it is the Sabbath, he will heal her. Those words are always our clue. And then, of course, the religious leaders will get (forgive me) all bent out of shape. They will lose no time in hitting the airwaves. One will go on the radio with some vitriolic talk show host and analyze the hell out of why Jesus frees her on the one day he isn’t allowed to do it. “I mean, Bill,” the expensively outfitted, really important looking,

authoritative sounding person will say to the nodding, grinning host, “there are laws about these things. She was a mess for eighteen years. What difference would another day have made? We have rules about these things, you know. Before you know it everyone will be running around telling folks to stand up straight. Everyone will be confronting Satan on the Sabbath. What would happen then? Who does he think he is? We have rules. We have laws.”

Another pompous religious rep will stare into the camera, shaking his head from side to side, worrying that kids will follow this radical; then, for sure, the whole system will crumble. That sound byte will be repeated over and over as the come-on to watch the six o’clock news. Another will write a scathing diatribe on the op-ed page referring with righteous passion to the letter of the law. “Never on Sunday!” the headline will read. None of them, however, in their obsession with when this happened, will mention a word about what really happened, about the miracle, about how she wasn’t sick any more, about how chains had been broken, about how she rejoiced, about how the crowd was whoopin’ it up because they understood that something wonderful had taken place. None of them—none of the angry talking heads or poison pens—will deal with the exquisite and profound and mind exploding truth. One of Abraham’s children, one of God’s children, is no longer captive, not longer bent over. She is free; she is standing tall. One woman has heard the voice of compassion and has been touched by the hand of love, and the dark spirit that contorts and destroys is sent packing. What a day. Not THAT is a headline!

“Woman you are set free from your ailment,” Jesus says. The word choice and the verb tense here are very important and are easy to miss in English. Jesus’ words don’t literally translate: “you are healed.” They

translate: “you are set free.” This verb in Greek is “...not a word usually associated with healing. Its general meaning is ‘to release’ or ‘send away’... The result of Jesus’ pronouncement is...literally ‘to set straight again’, certainly a cure for this woman’s bent-over-ness; but it also has the meaning ‘to restore’ or ‘to set right again.’”<sup>1</sup> Release. Untie. Send away. Set free. Restore. Set right again. He is setting her straight, and, to do that, he has to send away the spirit that blocks the wholeness that is authentically hers. Adding the again is significant because it indicates a return to how things should be; it implies that she is returning to how she was before this spirit came upon her. Also, the verb tense implies an action in the past with continued effects in the present. Something is going on here that is more than orthopedic. And that something is already accomplished.

That something is already accomplished—that this is an ongoing thing, not just a one time thing—is good news for all who are bowed down. I can imagine their faces; I can picture their pain. You know them; at times, you are one of them. There is the child bowed under the verbal assaults of a malicious parent, a child whose image of self is kicked and battered. That child’s true self simply cannot stand up straight. It sits fetal-like, curled up and hidden behind a façade of false, street-wise sassiness or meek subservience. There is the man who is bent under the incessant pressures of selling, conforming, producing, performing. His shoulders are drawn toward his heart as if to say: do not ask any more of me. Do not place any more on me. There is the woman staggering under the weight of a self imposed perfectionism, driven by some misguided “spirit” year after year to look and act a certain way, to be something that twists the truth out of her soul. There are the millions bent by the burdens of ageism, sexism, racism, any-ism.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke13x10.htm>

There are those imprisoned by poverty so pervasive that even breathing seems too expensive. There are those who bend their arms and curl up as they inject themselves with drugs that eat them alive. There are millions oppressed by brutality—some at the hands of mighty dictators, some at the hands of neighborhood gangs, some at the hands of one who pretends to love. There are so many bowed down in churches and mosques and synagogues not in prayer but in the anguish fueled by toxic religion. There are those whose spirits have been battered, squandered, stolen. We are bent by physical malformation, by emotional exhaustion, by spiritual despair. We slump over in order to withdraw, in order to avoid eye contact, in order to protect ourselves from attacks, real or imagined. Everyone, in some way, is bent over; everyone in some way needs help to stand up.

This includes each of us. Think of the ways you are bent over, bowed down, in bondage—say it whatever way works best for you. Conjure up the mental picture, the image that makes it real for you. What, exactly is it that stops you from standing up straight? What prevents you from being embraced by God’s community of grace? In what ways do things that you believe about yourself—things that are probably not true—hold you back and hold you down? How do painful memories paralyze you? Is there a dysfunctional relationship that chews you up and spits you out? In what ways do you “bend” to all of the demands of popular culture—to others’ ideas about how you should look or talk or act? Do you turn yourself inside out to fit into a workplace that saps your God-given spirit? What, metaphorically or actually, causes you to lower your face from the sun toward the ground? Is the worship of God, for you, a freeing event? And if it is that now—and I pray that it is—has some pastor or priest or false prophet

caused you to slump over/ How can we release ourselves from things and people and twisted beliefs and powers that keep us bent out of shape?

To answer this, imagine that you are the one to whom he calls that day. Imagine that what he says to her, he says to you. Each of us needs to be, by his words and by his touch, set free from what ails us, from what prevents us from standing tall, from living with assurance, from embracing others and accepting their embraces. Each of us is called from being the one who is outcast to the one who blesses and actively includes the outcast, from being the one who weeps to becoming the one who rejoices, from being bowed down to being raised up. That, expressed again and again, for over two thousand years, in the stories of so many, is the message of Christianity. That is the direction of Christianity, from bent to straight, from down to up. Picture this moment in all of its dramatic power for this woman. Then picture this moment for you. Imagine his call to freedom, release, healing, wholeness, forgiveness. It was cause for rejoicing then, and it is cause for party now.

When Jesus sees us bent in any of the ways we are bent he says to us just as clearly as he says to her: “you are set free.” But what makes this passage so significant is that it goes beyond the diagnosis of osteoporosis or the psychology of low self-esteem or the oppression of women—interesting interpretations all—to something more profound, more eternal, for her and for us. Look at the passage again. Look at what is really going on here. These words are about nothing less than who will call us and from what he will call us. It is about who will touch us and why. It is about transformation.

According to the text, the reason the woman is bent over is serious business—the most serious business. That visible “bentness,” as horrible and disabling as it is, is just an outward sign of the inner truth. It is not

something that can be “straightened out” by a membership at the gym, by a visit to Doctor Phil, or by listening to motivational tapes. The key verse in this passage is sixteen. Jesus affirms her by the strong, and very rare: “This woman is a daughter of Abraham!” He then goes on to say “Satan has bound her for, look, eighteen years. Is it not necessary to relieve her of this enslavement on the Sabbath day?”” Here is the punch line. The one behind all of this, no matter how it plays out, is a force here called Satan. The reason behind all of those words about being tied up and being released is that Satan has tied her up. The reason Jesus stops the important activity of teaching and calls to her is because confronting that spirit of distortion head-on is the most important thing that Jesus does.

And not only does he do it, but he does it on the Sabbath. What better day? Isn’t the message here that the Sabbath is about release, freedom, liberation? Luke Johnson writes: “Luke uses ‘bind’...in this metaphorical sense only here”<sup>2</sup>. From Jesus announcing that he has come to proclaim release to the captives, to the exorcism of the violent demoniac, to all that talk about releasing women and men from sins, Luke’s Gospel rocks our world with this powerful theme. And these words, this theme, are the heart of what Sabbath means, of why we are together, of why we must be together. “This connection is important, for the essence of the Sabbath was to be a ‘rest,’ that is a time of liberation...”<sup>3</sup>

The great and often overlooked truth of this story—a story found only in Luke—is that the Sabbath is the perfect day for this act. The Sabbath is a day of rest from all that weighs us down, ties us in knots, bends us out of shape, oppresses us, exhausts us, imprisons us. The Sabbath is a day of

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 212.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

liberation. By this act, on this day, Jesus does the most appropriate, necessary, powerful thing you can do. He says: You are not bent; you are straight. You are not enslaved; you are free. And he asks the question that echoes to us across two thousand years: “And 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?”

Well shouldn't she?

Shouldn't I?

Shouldn't you?

Shouldn't we?

Amen. Reverend Sharon Smith. The Gathering of Baltimore. March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020