

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
August 25, 2019, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
 Psalm 71:1-6, Luke 13:10-17
Set Free

“So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36”

And Jesus says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-30)

There is so much we don't know about her:

We don't know her name.

We don't know her village.

We don't know where in the Galilee region she went to the synagogue to worship her God.

We don't know if she had family: a husband, children, siblings, in-laws;

we don't know if she had friends;

we don't know what her neighbors thought of her, or how they treated her.

We don't know why she couldn't stand up straight.

We don't know what her "Long and serious illness (was), which is attributed to Satan."

(See Townes, p. 382.1.6)

We don't know why she didn't ask Jesus to help her.

There are some things we do know about this nameless woman;

She was a Jewish woman, who was part of a village, somewhere around the Sea of Galilee,

She was faithful to God,

and to her tradition of faith,

coming to the synagogue to worship on the Sabbath.

She was "a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years."

"She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." (Luke 13:11)

She took her physical challenge as a basic part of her life, she didn't even approach Jesus to ask him to heal her.

If we use our imaginations, we can also assume some things about this woman who has been remembered through the ages as the "bent-over woman:"

For 18 years she has faced the dusty ground of her village.

"...she must strain to see the sun, the sky, and the stars.

For 18 years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty.

...her world has been one of turning from side to side..."

(See Townes, p. 283.1.7 and Winter, p. 79)

For 18 years she hasn't had anyone look her right in the eyes;

her neck and back ache by the end of the day,

as she's looked at the people, and the world around her, with the sideways turns of her head.

As she's done the normal work of a woman of her village,

she's struggled to carry the weight of the daily water needed from the well;

she's probably had to make more trips than other women,

because of the weight of the bucket.

she's had to carry the sticks needed for her fire with her bent over walk;
 this has probably also meant more trips, because she can't carry heavier loads.
 As she cooks over the fire, she has been struggling to carry the cooking pot
 without spilling the soup or stew for the day; the pull of its weight straining her back.
 As she gathers with the other women to wash her clothes down on the rocks,
 she kneels down by the water, and rises again, with great difficulty.

There are some reasons her story may seem familiar to us:

She is not the only person who is under a painful crippling spirit and the weight of life.
 She is not the only one who knows the courage it takes some days to put one foot in front of the
 other.

She's known 18 years of the same pain;

she joins others who have known long-term affliction:

a long physical illness,
 a long journey with your own or someone else's mental illness,
 a long heart-break,
 a long season of grieving,
 a long time of feeling broken by life,
 a long-time addiction,
 a lifetime of worry and fear,
 a lifetime of carrying the weight of your child, your parent, your spouse,
 a lifetime of feeling different from everyone else,
 a lifetime of staring at the ground, when you've longed to look up and see the stars in the sky
 and to feel the warmth of the sun on your face.

We may not know her name, but her life's story has a familiar weight to it in the here and now.

Now, there are also some things we know about the leader of the synagogue:

He cares about the rules of his religion;

he'll do almost anything to make sure people follow the rules,
 exactly the way he understands them.

Rules are so important that when he witnesses the miracle of the bent-over woman standing up
 straight,

this woman of his village, and for that matter this member of his congregation, all he can do is
 shout to the crowd:

"This is wrong, there are six other days for healing, but today is the Sabbath and we
 have laws to make sure no one does any work."

You are all wrong to come here for anything except worship."

But this leader of the synagogue also knows the loopholes in the laws:

A person shouldn't work on the Sabbath,

but if a man has his donkey or ox tethered to the manger and the animal is thirsty
 then he is allowed to do the work of untying that ox or donkey and leading it to water.

His ranting at the crowd says loud and clear

that this woman should have spent at least one more day bent over
 so that the laws of God could be fulfilled;

she's lived that way for 18 years, one more day isn't going to kill her.

It's one thing to untether your donkey or ox so they can get water,

it's another thing entirely to untether this woman from the spirit that has crippled her for

18 years.

The rules of religion are more important than the needs of this woman.

There are some reasons his voice sounds familiar to us;

His is one of those insidious, harmful voices who say things like:

It is better to stay with familiar pain, than risk the unknown.

OR It's naïve to be hopeful, you should know better than that by now.

OR Why do you keep thinking things are going to change and get better, just buck up and live with it.

His is one of those harmful, misguided voices who say:

A wife should never leave her husband, or a husband his wife, even if they are emotionally or physically abusive.

OR You are never going to be able to change who you are, we all know it, why don't you?

OR Don't be a whistle-blower, that's not how we do it around here.

OR Stop crying, boys don't cry; you're too emotional, you've got to toughen up.

OR Why can't you act more like your sister, she never gets in trouble, she always gets good grades, you are nothing like her.

OR Don't talk to a therapist, or the pastor, or the school counselor, what happens in the family, stays in the family.

His is one of those insidious, harmful voices who say:

It doesn't matter if bullies always go after the same kid,

kids have always been picked on, it's just a part of life:

that's just boys being boys, or girls are just meaner at that age,

His is one of those insidious, lying voices who say:

Why are you still sad and moping around all the time, they died almost 10 months ago, you should be over that by now and get on with living.

You're just too thin skinned about everything, I was only teasing. Gee, can't you take a joke.

We may not know the name of this synagogue leader, but we sure know his voice,

Finally, thank God, there are some things we know about Jesus:

Jesus looks past rigid laws and religious expectations.

Jesus looks past the way the church, society and our families has always done things.

Jesus looks past all the "shoulds," and the barriers,
to see the woman who was bent over for 18 years.

And Jesus looks past all these things to see you and to see me
in those places where life has left us with a crippled spirit.

Jesus voice and truth rises above the voice of the synagogue leader saying: "hypocrite, you'd untether a donkey or an ox, but not this child of God?"

And Jesus voice and truth rise above the voices of our past,
the hateful words, lies told by others, lies we've told ourselves,
and all the ways those others have misrepresented God to us.

Jesus looks and listens past all the hypocrites in our lives to see us,
the ones
who long for healing,
who long for hope,
who long for change and to be changed,
who long to look up and see the stars in the night sky

and feel the warmth of the sun on our faces.

Jesus is God's love in our lives

Jesus doesn't always wait for us to single ourselves out from the crowd.

In God's good timing, Jesus comes to each one of us

to speak words of healing for what has bent us, and crushed us, in our lives.

Jesus comes to you this morning to silence all the negative voices in your head,

so you only hear the loving voice of God.

Jesus comes to you this morning to bring healing to your heart and life.

Jesus does this for you and for me

so we can join this sister in faith,

who's crippling spirit was banished and she was healed.

Jesus does this for you and for me so that we too can stand up straight, praising our God!

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