

Luke 13:10-17

One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. A woman was there who was severely disabled. Her body was all bent over so bent over that she was unable to stand straight. Luke tells us she could not straighten up at all. That strikes me as an unbelievably sad situation. Forgetting the pain and the inconvenience of not being able to straighten one's body, imagine what that would do to your self image. Imagine not just the physical pain, but the emotional pain of this kind of obvious deformity of the entire body. If you have any compassion at all or any ability to empathize with another human being, you can't help but hurt for this woman. She was so terribly disabled. But you also have to admire her. She did not allow her physical condition to keep her from worshipping God.

Notice how our story begins, "One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. A woman was there who was severely disabled. Her body was all bent over." Even with her pronounced deformity she was in the synagogue on the Sabbath. I admire her. I wonder if I would have that kind of courage to be in public with that kind of condition. Even more important she had not allowed her physical condition to impair her relationship with God. She had been this way for eighteen years all bent over and unable to rise up. The pain was sometimes severe. Yet, her habit was to be in worship to praise God. That's faith. Even today attendance in worship is a witness to our faith in Christ. Attendance in worship encourages others. God is waiting in this place to bless you, to heal you, to strengthen you. This woman would have missed the healing touch of Jesus if she had not been in worship that day.

From Luke's description we have to wonder whether the disease that crippled this woman could have been psychological in origin. Notice how Luke describes her condition: "On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years . . ." What does that mean, crippled by a spirit? In pre-scientific times, of course, it was quite common for people to attribute all disease to the presence of demons. This may be the simple explanation for this wording. Demon possession is certainly a recognized condition in the scriptures. Or, in modern terms, maybe Luke is saying to us that this woman's problem was caused by something that was troubling her mentally or spiritually.

Psalms 38, attributed to David, is very interesting. David writes, "I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart" (Psalm 38:6-8). If you read the rest of the Psalm, it is clear that David attributes at least part of the fact that he is bowed down to his own guilt. He writes, "Because of your wrath there is no health in my body; there is no soundness in my bones because of my sin. My guilt has overwhelmed me like a burden too heavy to bear" (38:3-4). Of course, David had a lot to feel guilty about. But there are other feelings which cause physical pain.

There was a time when I was helping to remodel a kitchen. I took great care in putting up wallpaper on the wall above where the counter would be installed. I watched in horror as the careless installer ripped the wallpaper as they let go of the new countertop and never apologized. I soon developed a backache. When I related my tale in class at seminary the professor said, "I think your backache has more to do with the ripped wallpaper than you would like to admit." The body tells the story. Psychological

problems can cause us to feel bowed down. We see someone who is deeply troubled, and we say, "He seems to be carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders . . ." Before long we even start to see it in his posture. Not as badly as this woman, of course, but we see the shoulders slump and the back bend.

Low self-esteem can cause a person to shrink into himself or herself. We tell our children, "Throw your shoulders back and stand tall . . ." But some children seem incapable of doing that and so a kind of life-long deformity of slumping shoulders and, even more tragically, a slumping spirit begins forming. All kinds of things in life can cause souls as well as backs to be bent or bowed down: humiliation and shame, lack of education, loss of a loved one through divorce or death, an accident, a disease, a problem with our appearance or personality.

We don't know if any of these applied to this poor woman. Maybe her problem was genetic. Or perhaps it was bacterial. All we know is that she was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. It is a powerful thought: Jesus can heal those who are bowed down, whatever the reason is for their condition.

This woman, whatever the origin of her spirit of infirmity was in worship on the Sabbath; when Jesus told her to step forward, she obeyed, and this terrible burden was lifted from her body and her soul. "Immediately she straightened up and praised God." Jesus can do that for you. If there is some burden that is weighing you down, give it to Jesus. Some secret sin, some sense of inferiority, some smothering anxiety, some lingering illness, give it to Jesus whatever it may be. You don't have to carry it alone. Jesus is here to heal and make whole.

Unfortunately this wonderful story of the healing of this woman doesn't stop here. Immediately after reading that this woman straightened up and praised God, Luke tells us about this second character. Listen to these words: "Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.'" Where do people like this come from? They throw boiling water on every new blossom. Wouldn't you think that everyone would be jumping up and down, giving God praise? But all they can do is criticize.

It is said that this is the last time Jesus entered a synagogue. We can understand it if it is true that Jesus never taught in a synagogue again after his encounter with this particular synagogue leader. And we can understand why some people who have been hurt by the church never darken its doors again. That's not what church is about.

But it is sad. This is a place where people still come today for healing and acceptance. This is a place where people still come today to find help for their hurting hearts. Imagine someone coming in the doors of our church who is bent over either figuratively or literally like this poor woman in today's story. Is she going to encounter the spirit of Jesus or is she going to encounter the spirit of this synagogue leader? The answer to that question is up to each of us—every one of us. Will they discover here a spirit that heals or one that hurts? Let's make certain that we are a church family that always seeks to heal, a church family that surrounds people with the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

All glory be to God.