

Stooped Over, Straightened Up
A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 14C (2016)
Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 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?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing (NRSV).

On the surface, it sounds like a typical healing story from the Gospels: Jesus is in a public place on the Sabbath day; someone comes to him with a need; Jesus sees the need, feels the pain, heals the person...and the religious authorities go berserk. For example: in the third chapter of Mark Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath day; a man with a withered hand comes to him; he sees the man, has compassion, heals him; and immediately, Mark says, "the Pharisees went out and conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." In the fifth chapter of John Jesus encounters a man who has been ill for thirty-eight years; he asks him if he wants to be made well, and then, without really waiting for an answer, tells him to take up his bed and walk. In that moment the man is healed and in the next moment the Jewish religious authorities begin persecuting Jesus. Just a few chapters later he heals a man born blind, and the religious authorities object, "This man couldn't be from God!" Why not? (listen carefully; there

will be a test) Because he healed on the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, the day in which their Law said no work was to be done including, they believed, the work of healing. So, when Jesus restores withered hands, useless legs, sightless eyes, he—typically—breaks the Law and the religious authorities are—typically—upset.

On the surface, at least, the story in today's Gospel reading from Luke sounds just like those other ones. Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath day; he sees this woman there, the one with the bent-over back; he feels for her, heals her, and the leader of the synagogue goes berserk. It falls into the same pattern as all those other healing stories. What makes this one different is the *nature* of this woman's problem. Luke says she came to the synagogue with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years, what some versions translate as a "spirit of infirmity." Not an infirmity, mind you; a *spirit* of infirmity. Luke, the beloved physician, seems to be trying to tell us that the problem this woman faced was not so much physical as it was spiritual, or psychological. Could it be, that a burdened mind, a burdened spirit, could result in a bent-over back? The first time I preached on this passage I called my doctor to find out:

"Oh, yes," she said. "It's called a conversion reaction. Hold on and I'll look it up." And a minute later she read from one of her medical books a long list of physical symptoms that can be caused by extreme mental or spiritual distress: fainting, seizures, paralysis, blindness, hearing loss, loss of speech, muscle weakness, difficulty swallowing...the list went on and on. "For all of these," she said, "there isn't any real physical problem. For instance, a person might be so afraid of what could happen if he leaves his house that he won't even get out of bed, and as a result he becomes an invalid, not because of sickness, but because of fear."

Hmmm.

You do hear that kind of language sometimes, don't you? "Paralyzed by fear," "Died of a broken heart," "Worried himself sick"? Bill Moyers says that our language is evidence of our innate understanding that the mind and the body are bound together, or as my doctor said, "the physical and the psychological are intertwined." So, where in other places in the Gospel Luke says that someone *had* leprosy, or *had* dropsy, or *had* an infirmity, here, he says, a woman came to Jesus with a "*spirit* of infirmity": a spiritual problem that was making her sick.

I still remember a story I heard from a colleague years ago, a true story apparently about a man whose right arm was drawn up in such a way that it had become almost entirely useless. One day the man confessed to his pastor that years earlier he had struck his daughter in anger and injured her to the point that she had to have medical attention, and that it took some time for her to heal. "It was during that time," the man said, "that my arm began to draw up. I've hardly been able to use it since, but that was years ago." The daughter had forgiven him, apparently, but as the pastor listened to that story he realized that what the man needed more than anything else was an assurance of God's forgiveness. And so he took hold of this man's right arm, drawn up against his chest as it was, and he prayed with the man that he might be able to accept the truth that God could forgive him of all things, even of that. While he was praying the pastor began to feel that arm relax, and within a few days this man had recovered full mobility in that crippled limb.

It seems like a clear example of the so-called "conversion reaction" my doctor described. Once the man was relieved of his guilt he was also relieved of his problem,

and it makes me wonder if this woman in Luke 13 wasn't suffering from a similar condition. There is no way to know, but just suppose that eighteen years before she encountered Jesus she had done something that caused within her such terrible guilt that she could no longer look anyone in the eye. Or, perhaps more likely, suppose that eighteen years earlier someone had done something to her that caused within her such terrible shame she could no longer look anyone in the eye. It's not so hard to imagine, is it? Not in her time. Not in ours. At first it would have been a matter of lowering her gaze to avoid eye contact, but eventually she might have begun to lower her head, and then her shoulders, and then her back, until eighteen years later you would find her hobbling around town using a short, sturdy walking stick to support her bent-over body. In all that time she would have been looking people straight in the...knees, which was probably better for her than looking them in the eyes. Knees don't look back, after all. Knees don't mock or accuse.

We can't be sure why she went to the synagogue that day. She may have gone because she heard there was a man there who could heal, but we don't know that. Luke doesn't tell us. He simply says that she appeared, crippled as she was, and that when she did Jesus took notice of her and responded to her need. Listen to the way Jesus deals with this problem:

1. First of all he *sees* this woman. He sees her—a woman who, because of her condition must have been easy for others to overlook. He sees her and somehow sees not only the bent-over condition of her body but also the bent-over condition of her spirit. He seems to have had that ability. If he were the guest preacher here today, if he were standing in the pulpit looking out over the congregation, don't you think he could

recognize those of us whose minds, hearts, spirits have been crippled by those things we have done or the things that have been done to us? Don't you think he could see, immediately, what we try to hide from everyone else?

2. Jesus' next step is to call the woman to him, and to her credit she comes. Jesus takes the initiative but she responds to his initiative; she takes her part in the process of healing. And if any of us who are in similar circumstances are going to be helped we will need to do the same. When someone says to us, "Come. Be healed. Be saved. Be forgiven." We will need to get up on our feet and come.

3. And then Jesus speaks to her, says to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." And do you notice the order? Before laying a hand on her he assures her of her freedom. "Woman, whatever shame or guilt has kept you roped down and doubled over has left you now. It has been cut loose, and so have you."

4. Only then does he lay hands on her, and when he does the words he has just spoken come true. Picture it like this: imagine an actual rope, tied like a noose around this woman's neck, looped down and around her knees, keeping her doubled over like that. And then imagine that Jesus puts one hand on her back, reaches down with a sharp knife, and cuts through the rope in one clean slice. In that moment the coiled spring of the woman's spine is released, her stooped-over body straightens up like a sprung trap. She gasps for breath, almost falls over backwards, but Jesus catches her, holds her by the shoulders, and when she looks into his eyes—the first pair of eyes she's looked into in eighteen years—what she sees there is not accusation, but acceptance. She begins to praise God.

And the leader of the synagogue goes berserk.

You know why, don't you? Because Jesus was healing on the...Sabbath. Right! And healing was considered a kind of...work. Right! And working on the Sabbath was against the...law. Right! "Listen!" the rabbi says to the crowd. "There are six days on which work ought to be done. Come on those days to be cured, not on the Sabbath day!"

Do you know I can almost sympathize with this man? At my church we work very hard to create a worship service that is both warm and dignified. I don't think I would appreciate it if the guest speaker on a given Sunday began healing people right and left and they began running around the sanctuary shouting "Hallelujah!" As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 14, everything in worship is to be done "decently and in order." But Jesus says to the leader of the synagogue and all those who are nodding in agreement, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath day untie his ox or his donkey and lead it to water? And shouldn't this woman, this daughter of Abraham, who has been tied up by this infirmity for eighteen years be untied on this day of all days? Wouldn't it be the godly thing not to let her wait a minute longer, not to let her suffer a second more, but to release her from this satanic bondage?"

Jesus understands that setting people free is the work of God, and that there is no day more appropriate for that than the Lord's day. Do you remember what he said on another Sabbath in his hometown synagogue? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19). Let me say it to you on this Lord's day: if you have been bound by a spirit of infirmity—by guilt, by shame, by fear, by despair, by self-loathing, by defeat—whatever it is that has roped down your mind, your heart, your

spirit, hear this word: on this day, in this place, Jesus slices through that rope and releases you! It is his nature, it is his pleasure, it is the work to which he was called and the purpose for which he came—to set the captives free.

When I was a boy, I used to read a beautifully illustrated edition of "Pilgrim's Progress" by John Bunyan. I remember that in the early pages of that book a man named Christian starts off from his city in ragged clothes with a huge burden on his back, a burden that is meant to represent his sin. It weighs him down, it bends him over, and for the first several pages of the book he staggers along under the weight of that enormous load. But at last he reaches a place where a cross has been erected, and one of the most wonderful pictures in that wonderful book is the picture of Christian standing at the foot of that cross as that heavy load falls from his back and vanishes into a bottomless pit behind him. The straps that were holding it onto his shoulders have been cut through, cleanly. For the first time in the book he is able to stand up straight. And even if you couldn't read the words you would get the picture:

The Christian is set free at the foot of the cross.

It seems like kind of an old-fashioned idea. It comes out of an old book, written hundreds of years ago. But what if it's true? What if Jesus still has the power to release us from the things that burden us, that bend us over? What if he's calling to you right now, inviting you to come? And what if all he's waiting for...

...is your response?

—*Jim Somerville, 2016*

