

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 13:10-17

I don't know her name. I don't know where she comes from. I don't know why she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day our Gospel reading records. But I can picture her. A weary woman, resilient and resigned. A woman "bent over," and "quite unable to stand up." A woman who spends her long days staring at the ground, staring at her feet, staring at the dusty sandals of those who pass her by on the road. Not because she wants to avoid eye contact, or miss each morning's sunrise, or forget what the stars look like, but because she has no other choice.

St. Luke tells us that by the time the bent over woman encounters Jesus, she's been crippled for eighteen years. I wonder if she showed up for worship every weekend during those exhausting two decades. I wonder if anyone noticed her. I wonder what hope, meaning, or solace the weekly ritual afforded her — if any. I wonder what sort of life she shuffled home to, afterwards.

According to the text, the woman doesn't ask Jesus for help when she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day in question. He's teaching — most likely surrounded by a crowd. She doesn't approach him. Who knows if she even *notices* him, bent over as she is? But he notices her. He *sees* her. When he calls her over and she approaches, he puts his sermon on hold, and says the thing Jesus always says in the Gospels when he encounters the sick, the broken, the dying, the dead: "You are set free from your ailment."

Then, the Gospel tells us, Jesus "laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." This is the line I stumble over. The line that makes my eyes fill and my brain burn: "*Immediately she stood up straight.*"

I think the line bowls me over because I am not accustomed to thinking of the church as a place where hunched, crippled, exhausted people are invited, encouraged, and released to "stand up straight." Especially not people who are disenfranchised by those who hold power and authority both inside and outside the church. Women, people of color, immigrants, the LGBTQ community, the poor, the homeless, the elderly, the

incarcerated, the mentally ill, the differently abled, the uneducated or under-educated, the spiritually broken.

Why is this? *Why* don't I think of the church as a place where people unable to stand up on their own can come to have their dignity restored and their full potential realized? Why, when I think of the church, do I more often picture people bent over? Bent beneath the weight of shame, judgment, invisibility, false piety, condemnation, prejudice, legalism, and toxic theology?

Unfortunately, the Gospel story itself offers the answer. As soon as Jesus unbinds the crippled woman, the leader of the synagogue voices his displeasure and indignation. Essentially, his angry criticism drowns out her joyful praise: "There are six days on which work ought to be done," he tells the crowds. "Come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

In other words, the leader protests because Jesus disrupts the regular Sabbath schedule of the synagogue. Jesus messes with tradition. Worse, he places a socially expendable, physically disabled, spiritually vulnerable woman at the *center* of the tradition. Jesus allows the woman's need to interrupt his own sermon, and welcomes her praise song even though it upends the synagogue's order of service.

To be clear, the leader of the synagogue is not an evil man. His intentions are not wrong, and his concerns are not without merit. He cares about right worship. Right belief. Right practice. He cares about honoring the Sabbath, obeying God's laws, and upholding the faith-filled traditions of his spiritual community. There is nothing wrong with any of these goals.

But what the leader misses is the *heart* of the Sabbath, the heart of God's law, the heart of the tradition. What the leader misses is the brave, unrestricted compassion that trumps legalism in God's kingdom every single time. This is a compassion that doesn't cling to orthodoxy for orthodoxy's sake. It's a compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, the broken spirit — *before* it sees the broken commandment.

It's worth noting here that Jesus doesn't reject religious traditions outright. What he rejects is the legalism, the self-righteousness, and the

exclusivism that so often undergird them. What he rejects is anything that keeps us from freely loving other people in ways that are creative, flexible, and grounded in deep empathy. What he rejects is our unwillingness to evolve, to adapt, and to change for the sake of God's kingdom.

It doesn't matter what specific forms our legalism takes. The guises might vary, but in the end, legalism in *any* guise deadens us towards God and towards our neighbors. It freezes us in time, making us irrelevant to the generations that will come after us. It makes us stingy and small-minded, cowardly and anxious. It strips away our joy and robs us of peace.

This is why, I believe, Jesus spent his earthly ministry surrounded by those who had no other legs to stand on. We should pay attention to the fact that it was never the pious elite who warmed to his message and mission – they were too busy defending religion. The people who saw the truth in Jesus were the desperate people. The people who knew the enormity of their own needs, hungers, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities. The people who understood that they'd never keep the whole law, or achieve any kind of righteousness on their own. To them, Jesus was God, because he was Love. Love without limits. Love that unbends. Love that sets free.

This story — like so many Gospel stories — illustrates a basic truth about God's in-breaking kingdom: the kingdom doesn't care about our timing, or our sense of etiquette, or our obsession with propriety and decorum. The kingdom cares about love. It cares about love NOW.

Most of us (like the woman in the story) know what it's like to be bound by circumstances that diminish, distort, and wound us. Most of us know (or have known) what it's like to lose agency, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own. Some of us are still “crippled,” because we have not experienced the church as a place where we are seen, cherished, called, invited, unbound, and released to praise God with our unique stories of healing. How, given these realities, can we leave room for Jesus to show up and surprise us? How can we make sure we're not so entrenched in our theological, liturgical, cultural, or political points of view that we fear and resist the new? The unorthodox? The unconventional? How can we make sure that our religious practices and preferences don't get in the way of God's tender, compassionate “unbending?”

Jesus responds to the leader of the synagogue by calling the healed woman “a daughter of Abraham.” *“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?”*

Jesus doesn’t stop at freeing the woman. He restores her to community — to *her* community. At the same time, he calls on that community to repent of its hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness, and embrace her as its own. Not as an object of pity or scorn. But as a daughter, as an heir, as a human being worthy of both love and dignity.

“Jesus laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight.” What would it be like if the church were known for this? For restoring stature, dignity, community, and honor to people crippled in all the terrible ways the world cripples them?

This remarkable Gospel story asks us to notice what kind of fruit our adherence to tradition bears. Does our version of holiness lead us to hospitality? To inclusion? To freedom for ourselves and others? Does it cause our hearts to open wide with compassion? Does it lead the broken to feel loved and welcomed at God’s table? Does it make us pliant and flexible? Does it prime our minds and hearts for a God who is always doing something new?

The bottom line is, Jesus is *all about* our unbending. Our standing tall. Our finding our voices, so that we can praise the God who facilitates and celebrates our freedom. May we become “un-benders” as well, rooted in traditions that begin and end in love.

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