

“Straighten Up”  
Luke 13:10-17  
August 22, 2010

See if this sounds familiar. You’ve been doing yard work. The heat index is 109. You are sticky and sweaty, but you are missing a key ingredient for dinner and you need to go to the grocery store. It’s late so you take a chance. Perhaps if you walk fast and keep your head down, you can get in and out without being seen. You zip down the dairy aisle only to spot hovering over the butter that one person who is always ready to tell you everything that’s happened in his life that day. You stop dead in your tracks and make a slow turn so that you can work the grocery store from the bread aisle and wait for him to leave. Should you get caught, you’ve got that figured out too. You will act surprised as if you’ve been so engrossed in whole grains. You will raise your eyebrows. Cock your head to one side...oh, I did not see you standing there.

Have you noticed how good most of us are at looking away? We can catch each other’s eye across a room and look away so quickly that we pretend it never happened. We do it in the grocery store, we do it when we pass the homeless on the street, we do it with people we don’t like. We even do it with the people that we know the best and love the most. Sometimes we do it because we are on the flip side – we want to disappear or hope to be invisible because we’re afraid of what others might see if they catch our eye. Either way, looking at the ground becomes a way of life. At some level, we know that if we look up, something that requires our presence is going to happen. And sometimes life is a lot less painful if you don’t get involved.

In our story, it is the Sabbath. No involvement allowed. Do not light a fire. Do not clap your hands. Do not jump. Do not visit the sick. Why? It was the Sabbath. These were the rules. As a rule, Jesus spent his Sabbath in the synagogue teaching. He saw a woman come in and try to make her way to the girl power side of the sanctuary. She did not notice Jesus. She did not ask him for healing or try to touch the hem of his robe. She was just trying to get to worship, and honestly, I don’t think she COULD have noticed much about Jesus. She had been bent almost in half for eighteen years. Shoulders hunched and neck bent downward – she faced the ground every day. Twisted like a human pretzel, she learned not to see and not to be seen.

Do you know what that must have been like? You may not have a bent back, but sometimes the worst injuries don’t happen to our physical bodies. They happen inside. This woman had more than a bent back. The text says that she was with a *Spirit* that had crippled her for eighteen years. A Spirit. Now, we could be talking about a demon spirit with horns and a tail. Or we could be talking about a broken spirit - someone who was dealt a bad blow in life and never got over it. It doesn’t matter what kind of Spirit it was. The fact is that it got to her, and it stayed on her back until her body conformed to its image.

I don’t know if you have ever known anybody like that. Have ever been anybody like that. Somebody, perhaps, who has started to believe that the job or the break or the ship is never going to come in. Somebody who has bought the idea that he will never be able to do enough to catch up. Someone who believes she is too old to make a difference and nobody understands what is happening in her life. Someone who can make his mouth say, “God loves me,” but cannot say it in his heart. Someone who was so sure of everything and then had it blow to bits in her face. If you’ve ever been there, if you have ever been caught in a faith crisis—knowing that the one thing you need to straighten yourself out is the very thing you can’t seem to come up with—maybe you can appreciate what it was like for this woman.

Her vision was one of feet and paths, not faces with smiles and conversation. But, I have to hand it to her – she got up and came to worship. She got up and got herself to worship – made that effort and it must have been a Herculean effort given her health. She did that with no expectation that anyone would pay her any mind or give her any attention – that is not why she was there. So, my guess is that when Jesus called to her, she missed it. Her first thought must have been that he was talking to someone else. But, when she did turn that twisted body around so that she could look up just enough, would you believe that? This man was speaking to her. Jesus called her to him and placed his hands on her – and I can't imagine he did that without looking in her eyes, so he must have gotten on her level, on his knees, to place his hands on her and set her free - unheard of actions for a Jewish man, and on the Sabbath!

But, Jesus was a radical. He was not afraid to hold anybody accountable for better living– to give them a fighting chance for life in abundance. Jesus knew the power that sparked when the love of God touched the need of the people. He wanted this woman's life to be defined by the love of God NOT what bent her double.

That begs the question - what defines us? What bends US into the shape of who we are? As a church? As individuals? What keeps you up at night? What do you love to complain about? What holds us hostage? And, if Jesus himself got down on his knees to look into our downcast eyes, and if he got right in our face and put his hands on us and straightened us into something of God, who would we be? What would we talk about? Would we even have anything to talk about? What would occupy our thoughts day in and day out if we could walk straight up, shoulders back and head held high?

Because that is exactly what he did for this woman. He wanted her to walk upright in body AND in spirit - to stand as a free person in body AND in spirit. We are not all going to be physically healed, but Jesus promises freedom from what vandalizes our spirits – he dares us to not to be defined by our sicknesses or our character flaws – the one who is depressed, the one who over analyzes, the one who is a perfectionist, the one who is bitter, the one who is too sensitive, the one who can't let things go, the one who does too much – add your own – whatever it is. Jesus says, 'You don't have to be any of that. Straighten up. You are a son of Abraham. You are a daughter of Abraham.' That's what he tells the woman. That must be an important title, because this is the only place in scripture where that phrase "daughter of Abraham" is used. Jesus gets on his knees to tell this woman she is being a sought out, cared for, a whole person within the family of God. Now, that's the God I'm talking about. That's your God. That's a God with some power. That's the God who changes who we are.

The minister Craig Barnes has written a book called "When God Interrupts." He tells of having a bad pastoral day –everything that could have gone wrong did and he was so far behind. But, he had this commitment at the nursing home – so he went grudgingly and hoping he could get in and out without anyone looking at him for too long. He went to see Mrs. Lucille Lins. Mrs. Lins was almost blind and very hard of hearing. She had outlived her husband and close friends. Her health slipped away and few people took the time to see her. So, the Rev. goes in all cheery like – he went through the motions of communion - this is my body, blah, blah, blah, this is my blood – ho hum. Mrs. Lins took the bread with her shaking hands, she tried to get the cup to her lips and in the process spilled juice all over his slacks – one more thing that went wrong. But, the Rev. patted her on the back – told her that God loved her, and he marked off his pity visit for the day. He got up to leave, and Mrs. Lins started praying – as clear as a bell. "Thank you, God, for being so good to me. Thank you that I am not forgotten. Thank you for always loving me." Rev. Barnes sat back down – Mrs. Lins actually had lost enough to bend her

double, if that is where she wanted to be – but Jesus had gotten his hands on her, and she knew – nursing home or not – that what defined her life was her love of this God who got down on his knees and called her a daughter of Abraham, and she took her cue from our unnamed woman in scripture. She let God do his thing, and she thanked God. She praised God.

That's power. That is a transforming power. It only requires one thing. We have to recognize ourselves as people who are bent and as people in need of God's mercy. That is a hard lesson. Most Christians want to be of service to God, but we want to start that service as qualified people - somebodies who deserve to be used. But, the truth is that sooner or later, life will leave us all with crippled relationships, distorted dreams, and twisted health. That can happen to us as individuals or even as the church. By the time we hobble over to Jesus – who has been calling to us for a long time – all that is left is our common need to be set free.

Can you hear him? See, today, I, a sinner saved by God's grace, called by God to preach the word, I get to do something great. I get to stand here before you and tell this story and offer this same Jesus – Savior, Counselor, Comforter to you. I get to tell you that he wants to set you free, to set this church free, from whatever ails us. And, as you know, when you know him yourself, you, too, get the joy of offering him to others. But, you must recognize your need. You must hear him say, "Be free." So, check yourself. Look. You will find – I promise you – you will find this same God who loves you – no matter who you are, no matter what you do, no matter your quirks or your bad habits or your disastrous decisions. God bends down to reach out to you. You have a God who loves you. Because you are and because he sees you standing there. That comes with responsibility, of course. You now have to walk upright, and you now must make sure that when you are straightened up, are not weighing anybody else down – pushing anybody else's eyes down so that they have to look at your feet. You have to check yourself every day, and be vigilant with any gift of healing that God pours into you. Guard it. Because if you are loving people and having a good time, the devil does get jealous and tries to mess things up. It happened in our story in the form of synagogue rulers and it happens in our lives in forms and shapes we do not even want to even imagine. We must be vigilant so that when we are tempted to stare at the dirt, we instead have the faith to offer praise and prayer. THAT's what we talk about now. THAT's what we involve ourselves with now. Praising God. "Thank you, God, for being so good to me." Can we start the conversation now? Will you say that with me? I'll repeat it for you. "Thank you, God, for being so good to me. Thank you that I am not forgotten. Thank you for always loving me." You're a daughter of Abraham. You're a son of Abraham. So, straighten up. You ARE a child of God. Isn't that deserving of some praise?