



Pentecost 13 – Year C – 2010

Text: Luke 13:10-17

Sermon given at St. John's, Cobble Hill on Sunday August 22nd 2010.

Using resources from John Shea, Daniel Clendenin and Richard Rohr.

Let us pray:

Jesus, by your gentle touch and encouraging word, you raised up the woman who had been bent over: Lift up the heads and hearts of those who have been bowed down by the shame and pain of abuse. Heal them so that they may stand up with dignity and may praise you through the living of their lives in fullness and in hope. Amen.

I read an article recently about someone who travelled to Ethiopia in 2005. While there, this person and the group he traveled with took a day trip to the mountains that surround the capital city of Addis Ababa. At the summit the group enjoyed the panoramic views, identified buildings in the distance below, and gasped for breath after walking uphill in the alpine air. That was the fun part, he said.

The disturbing part was their climb from the city center at 7,000 feet to the summit at 11,000 feet. As their mini-van belched clouds of light blue exhaust, the higher they went the more women and girls they passed carrying loads of firewood back down the mountain. Barefoot and bent over at the waist, these women carried seventy-five pound bundles of eucalyptus saplings, seven feet wide, down to the city center about ten miles away, all for a few pennies. The firewood carriers in Addis Ababa are a common sight, so much so that you can read about them in travel guidebooks like the Lonely Planet.

Well, I couldn't help but think of these firewood carriers of Addis Ababa when I read this week's gospel and especially how they reminded me of the crippled woman in the story we just heard read from Luke. Luke is the only gospel to tell this story. It's the last time in his gospel that Jesus enters a synagogue to teach. Luke writes that the woman had been "crippled by a spirit for eighteen years" and as a consequence was "bent over and could not straighten up at all" (13:10–17). The article I was reading about the firewood carriers had an interesting parallel to this. The author of that article wrote these words: "In Addis Ababa I kept wishing that those women and girls who were 'bent over and could not straighten up at all' could be freed from their bondage."

Making a medical diagnosis 2,000 years after the fact is futile. Maybe the woman in Luke's gospel had a form of scoliosis. Others speculate about some type of spinal ossification or fusion. Perhaps she had suffered an injury. I wonder if she was just plain worn out from a hard life of manual labour. Like the firewood carriers in Addis Ababa, her condition reflected the complex interplay of vicious causes and consequences — medical infirmity, community indifference, social marginalization, economic injustice,





oppressive gender roles, and even religious blame: "Don't complain, your suffering is punishment for your sins." Whatever her condition, her prognosis was bleak: "she was bent over and could not straighten up at all" we read in this story.

Luke, a physician by training, writes that she was "crippled by a spirit." Jesus describes her as "bound by Satan for eighteen long years." I can easily imagine myself as a spiritual cripple if I had physically suffered like she had. The totality of her human degradation was greater than her medical ailment. For those who dismiss that diagnosis as a pious and pre-scientific myth, I can only say that it's just the sort of thought you have when you see a barefoot ten-year-old girl beneath a seventy-five pound load of firewood like a farm animal: "She's suffering a condition of spiritual darkness and bondage; she, of course, herself is not evil, but her condition sure is. There's something here even worse than the economic exploitation."

Interestingly enough, neither Luke's nameless woman, her family, nor any of her friends (did she have friends?) asked Jesus to heal her. She probably didn't know Jesus, and maybe had never even heard of him. I picture her going to the synagogue with her familiar routine of doing everything possible to avoid drawing attention to herself. No doubt she kept to herself and kept out of harm's way in the back of the synagogue; after eighteen years of chronic disabilities she knew her place. But Jesus did not leave her to herself.

When Jesus saw her he called her to come forward. Watching her shuffle forward, her contorted body bent to the ground, must have felt like an excruciating eternity, like watching an accident in slow motion. I wonder what she felt and thought in the hushed silence, with all those eyes on her. In front of the crowd, Jesus did something that I'm sure no one had done to her for a long, long time, something that violated the gender taboos of the day. He "put his hands on her" and touched her. Then he said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Freed from physical and spiritual bondage, "she immediately straightened up and praised God."

That miracle of divine compassion provoked an outburst of religious hypocrisy. The ruler of the synagogue was indignant. Maybe he didn't like his neat and proper service being upset. Maybe he had tried and failed to help this same woman in his own way, or perhaps he felt upstaged by Jesus. Whatever ignited his anger, he cloaked his feelings in terms of religious zeal. Afraid to confront Jesus directly, he complained to the crowd that Jesus had violated the fourth commandment by "working" on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 5:12–15). Couldn't the woman and Jesus have waited just one day, when the Sabbath would be over? "Come and be healed on those days," he raged, "not on the Sabbath."





Jesus exploded at their sanctimony, their human callousness, and their theological hair-splitting: "You hypocrites!" Human compassion, healing, and wholeness are far more important than religious ritual and misplaced zeal. Besides, said Jesus, their own rabbis had determined that brute beasts depended on them for a drink of water: "Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water?" If it's not only permissible but necessary to water an animal on the Sabbath, "then must not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath from what bound her?" No, said Jesus, divine mercy would not wait one more day to heal a fellow human being.

So what do we make of all this? How do we understand this story in our own day and in the culture we live in. Well, first it's important to remember here that [*according to John Shea]: "We live in a medically saturated culture today. Immersed as we are in this culture, we immediately wonder about the exact nature of the crippled woman's ailment and the exact nature of the cure. Even if we believe that God in Jesus is capable of working such miracles, we still tend to wonder how were the damaged bones, tissues and nerves of the crippled woman repaired? We are people with developed medical minds, and these are the questions that medical minds ask. However, it is important to remember that this Gospel story is not concerned with the details of diagnosis and cure.

Jesus lived in a theologically saturated culture. The miraculous cure of the bent over woman at the centre of today's story is presented as: theology. And by theology I don't mean so much an intellectual pursuit, but rather any understanding of God in a specific situation. You see, this story stirs up Jesus' theology of mission (of what his mission is); the synagogue's theology of illness and women (in general); and both of their theologies of Sabbath. In particular, the woman's condition is a symbol of the effect of synagogue theology; and the woman's cure is a symbol of the effect of Jesus' theology of mission. Both of these theologies revolve around the Sabbath and, reveal the intentions and nature of God. In fact, all gospel miracles are meant to function as encouragements to ponder God's relationship with people as a guide to how people should relate to one another.

The bent-over condition of the woman reflects the general tendencies of a religion that uses its theology and laws to oppress people rather than liberate them. Jesus, through his words and actions, immediately corrects the impact of the spirit of this kind of theology on this woman. When Jesus sees her and calls her to himself, she becomes visible. One of the results of theological perspectives that subordinate females to males is that it makes women invisible. The bodily symbol of being bent over means the person is never at eye level. They do not see others face to face nor are they seen face to face. When Jesus talks to her, he not only breaks the custom of men avoiding women in public, but he addresses her as "woman". This is not simply a designation of her





gender; it is a mark of profound respect. In the Spirit-driven mission of Jesus, the invisible become visible, the ones at the margins become the centre of attention.

Now, it should also be said here that Jesus was in no way criticizing Judaism itself. Jesus' welcome of this woman in shul אֶסְנוּגָה (synagogue), is not the act of a rebel, ignoring tradition and custom. His actions of calling her out, talking to her, touching her and healing her are theologically motivated. He is doing what God has done from the beginning—freeing people from what oppresses them. What God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, God says throughout history—"Let my people go!" (Exod. 7:16). If no one else in the synagogue knows this, then Jesus and the woman do. When she stands straight, dignified and whole, she praises God.

The leader of the synagogue in this story is absolutely clueless. His theology is a boa constrictor that has squeezed all compassion out of him. Instead of rejoicing at the liberation of the woman, he becomes indignant that his theological understanding of the Sabbath has been violated. He is obviously one of those leaders who is always waiting to be offended. He makes his difficulty sound rational and well considered, as befits his theology.

How could so obvious a revelation of God's love for a daughter of Abraham have eluded him and others in that synagogue for so long? If they had reflected on this, the answer would have been available to them. Their theology blinded them.

And if we reflect on this, I think we will also find an answer available to us. The answer we receive may also reveal how our theology can blind us from seeing those oppressed and bent over in our world today. Yes, it may be the women firewood carriers in Addis Ababa, or the way women are used in sexual exploitation and human trafficking today, for example. If you don't think women are still experiencing the weight of abuse today do a "Google image search" using the words "the bent over woman" and you will be shocked by what you find. But maybe, and much more disturbing, is how our own theology can become the cause of others not being seen, or bent over to such a degree that we cannot even see their eyes. We may say it is because we don't like their moral behaviour or their interpretation of scripture, or how they practice their religion, but the result is the same.

I was reading on a BBC News website this week about a story on why (according to some experts) the world donations to the Pakistan flood appeals have been so sluggish. One expert (Dr. Marie Lall) said: "British Prime Minister David Cameron's comments in India [when he said Islamabad promoted the export of terror] did not help." Dr Elizabeth Ferris says: "People are less likely to donate to any country seen as a haven for terrorism. And more generally, the fact that so much Western news coverage in recent years about Pakistan has been negative, anti-Islamic, stressing its links with the conflict





in Afghanistan. I think this is the major reason for the slow public response – (she said) the image of Pakistan in our media. There may also be a feeling, particularly in the US, that Islamic governments and charities should be stepping up to the plate to donate."

These answers may be debateable and may not appear to be entirely theological, but I think they do reflect a way of seeing that ultimately affects our response to the needs of others. Personally, I would like to paint the leader of the synagogue in today's gospel as an insensitive chauvinist. In that way, I could dismiss him, fairly confident that we have nothing in common. But I suspect a fuller appreciation would see him as a victim of his theology. His theologically structured mind only allows him to see the stooped woman as a sinner being punished for her sins. The theologically structured mind of Jesus sees a bent over daughter of Abraham who needs to stand straight. Different theologies allow us to see different realities.

I think we always need to remember that theologies are ideas in the mind; and ideas in the mind can subtly support attitudes and behaviours we may not want. Like when our theologies allow us to slip into all-or-nothing thinking. As Richard Rohr has so wisely said: "More than with any other personality trait in my life, all-or-nothing thinking has caused me to make huge mistakes, and bad judgements, hurt people and myself, withhold love, and misinterpret situations. Why do we do this to ourselves and one another? Don't I know that every viewpoint is a view from a point? Don't I know by now that some of the information is never all of the information? This ability to stand back and calmly observe, without rushing to judgement is foundational for spiritual seeing. It is the primary form of "dying to the self" that Jesus lived personally.

The delusion is that we can find and formulate the right theology, the theology that will only have positive effects on attitudes and behaviours. But we are too psychologically and socially complex for so simple a solution. Instead, we need to develop the discipline of suspicion. All our theologies must be investigated in terms of how they allow us to function. When we know the limits of our ideas, we also know their potential. As so many of the world's great spiritual traditions have insisted, true wisdom is to know that we do not know. I think the challenge of today's gospel is to discover that one way of setting people free is to become suspicious of theological ideas that hold them in bondage. Amen.

Let us pray:

Jesus, by your gentle touch and encouraging word, you raised up the woman who had been bent over: Lift up the heads and hearts of those who have been bowed down by the shame and pain of abuse. Heal them so that they may stand up with dignity and may praise you through the living of their lives in fullness and in hope. Amen.





For further reflection:

When religious rituals like Sabbath-keeping and fasting — or our Bible studies, sermons, church attendance, and retreats — are divorced from human health and wholeness, whenever a believer "turns away from your own flesh and blood" (Is. 58:7), then our religion has gone very bad indeed. Conversely, when you care for your neighbour like you would care for your own self, you have fulfilled the deepest purposes of all religious rituals.

- * What have been your experiences of Sabbath-keeping and fasting?
- * Have you ever known a person with a severe and chronic medical condition?
- * In what ways have religious rituals usurped compassion, justice, and mercy in your own life?
- * Do we still need religious rituals if we exercise compassion, justice and mercy? Why or why not?
- * Meditate on Micah 6:8: "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Rev. Scott Pittendrigh

