

Stand Up
By Rev. Michael Blackwood
United Church of Broomfield
March 31, 2019

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ 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. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ 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.' ¹⁵ 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? ¹⁶ 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?' ¹⁷ 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.

We've been reading of women's encounters with Jesus in *Back to the Well*. So, our focus has been from the women's point of view, literally and figuratively. Looking at these stories from a feminist lens. This week's gospel story from Luke is "a bent woman." So, let's dive right in and see what the bent woman can teach us.

When we read this story, it's quite normal to say that our emotions are stirred. We're elated for the woman – eighteen years of pain, healed in an instance. Hallelujah, indeed! We're upset with the Synagogue leader, to say the least, for being angry with Jesus for healing the woman. "Really? Jesus just healed this woman and you're mad about it?"

Clearly, we see how much difficulty this leader was having putting himself in the place of this suffering woman when instead of focusing on her miraculous healing, he chose to focus on "the rules." "What, crippled for 18 years? Well, that's too bad, but there's no need to interrupt our Sabbath just for *that*. You've managed to live bent double this long, so a few more days won't make any difference. There are six other days of the week. Seek healing on one of those days."

At the term of the 20th century, influenza was known for being a great pandemic, killing thousands upon thousands of people around the globe. In 1928, Sir Alexander Fleming, a Scottish researcher, was experimenting with the influenza virus in the Laboratory of the Inoculation Department at St. Mary's Hospital in London, searching for a clue that might lead to its cure, or at least to impede its often-fatal effects.

Often described as a careless lab technician, Fleming returned from a two-week vacation to find that a mold had developed on an accidentally contaminated staphylococcus culture plate, inhibiting its growth.

He extracted from the mold the substance that stopped the bacteria and called it "penicillin." Fleming found that penicillin killed staphylococcus, hemolytic streptococcus, pneumococcus, gonococcus, diphtheria bacilli,

and a myriad of other bacteria that were sources of human sickness and death; but it did no harm to the influenza bacteria....and that was his focus after all, stopping the influenza bacteria.

While discovering penicillin and its ability to kill so many types of harmful bacteria to the human body, he did not try to develop penicillin into a medicine. The influenza bacteria was so important, that he focused only on penicillin's ability to help him study influenza.

A decade later, researchers Howard Florey and Ernst Chain, were able to see what Fleming could not and they developed Fleming's observations into the world's first wonder drug.

Talk about not being able to see the forest for the trees...

The woman is bent out of shape, but in reality, it's the synagogue leader who seems more bent out of shape than she. He was so caught up in the rules, the minutiae of sabbath worship, that he lost sight of the bigger picture. Now, we ought to remember than the rules surrounding sabbath, especially at that time, were very important. The rules helped the Jewish people, a people constantly being oppressed, marginalized and displaced, to stay united and to identify themselves as God's people. That's the synagogue leader's point of view – if we disregard the rules, we're in danger of being scattered and displaced, exiled and enslaved, yet again – and we can't let that happen. Jesus gets that. Jesus does not question the principles and importance of sabbath worship, but rather its application.

- What's the point in following the rules of worship, if we lose our compassion in the process?
- "Yes, these are the rules, but we need to be able to see the bigger picture in order to interpret and apply the rules in ways that honor them, our God and each other, with love and compassion."

And isn't that what we hear from Jesus? Jesus never taught others to disregard the law, but rather to understand it so deeply and fully, as to apply it justly, empathetically and lovingly.

One giveaway that this leader did not empathize with this woman's plight is in his assumption that she had come to the synagogue for the express purpose of asking Jesus to heal her. But that's not what the gospel account says. It merely reports that she was present that morning. We rightfully assume that she was there simply to praise God, bent double as she was.

She was an innocent by-stander, minding her own business, worshipping "according to the rules," I'm sure. In fact, she said nothing to Jesus; rather, *he noticed her*, and he made the first move.

In other words, the big difference between the synagogue leader and Jesus was that the leader did not put himself into this poor woman's sandals, and Jesus did. Jesus felt the burden of her situation and knew that it should not be tolerated another minute.

We know that Jesus said loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves is the heart of following him. But how can we love our neighbors as ourselves if we do not at least attempt to put ourselves into their position?

There are many people who are “bent double” in some way or another for reasons other than medical. They continually have to accommodate themselves to a society that considers them as less-than. It so regards them because they are different from the majority group or the privileged group or the mainstream group. They are bent double by the burden of racism, sexism, economic inequality, cultural or religious bias, or some other force.

Frances Gench explores that in *Back to the Well*. **Why** is the woman bent double? Our scripture says that she “had a spirit that had crippled her.” That’s all. Let’s not forget that Luke was a physician by trade and yet he provides no medical analysis or explanation for her condition. Now, it certainly could be an actual disease. From the Greek, it says that she had “pneuma astheneias” – a spirit of weakness. That word astheneias is translated variously as infirmity, disease, sickness or weakness.

Many modern interpreters diagnose her “astheneias” very specifically as a disease called Ankylosing Spondylitis, or Marie-Strümpell Disease, a chronic form of arthritis that occurs slowly over time and can cause the spinal bones to fuse causing a permanent bent over stance.

Her crippling astheneias could also have something to do with actual demonic possession. In that time, many physical and mental conditions weren’t understood – they didn’t have the science that we have now-a-days, and thusly a common explanation for many unexplainable conditions was either one was possessed by a demon or a it was punishment from God.

Lastly, the woman could be bent double because it was truly caused by a weak spirit - her spirit for life. Could there have been anything that would have made her feel “beaten down in spirit?” It’s 1st Century, Roman-Occupied Israel...

- Female – marginalized as less-than simply for her gender
- Social status – married? Mother? We know nothing of these aspects of her life, but we know they’re a major factor in a woman’s value
- what is her financial situation? We know nothing. Has she been forced to do literally, back-breaking work to survive and the result is both a physical disability, as well as a spiritual beat-down?

Is it so difficult for any of us to image that due the systems in place she might have had low self-esteem, low self-image, self-doubt, a need for self-censorship – to stifle thoughts and feelings in order to survive? She lived in an environment, that frankly ALL women lived in, in which their very human spirits were automatically beaten down and crippled from the moment of their birth?

This story of Jesus healing the woman is at minimum a call for a little humility on our part, which may mean suspending judgment of others long enough to at least try to learn what it is like to be them. Before this incident, did the synagogue leader even know of her? If he did, had he ever bothered to talk with her? Inquire about her life? Dignify her existence?

Jesus calls out their blatant hypocrisy – “you care enough for your ox or donkey that on the sabbath you’re willing to work so that they can have a drink of water, but you can’t extend the same compassion and courtesy to this woman? Is she no better than a beast of burden? Doesn’t she deserve *at least* the same treatment? Do

not let your adherence to laws blind you to the justice and love that is rightfully deserved before your eyes right now.

In the synagogue that morning, Jesus was not saying, “Oh my. Look at that poor woman. In her bent-over condition, she can’t stand up with the rest of us to sing or kneel with us to pray, but we respect where she’s at and we’re okay with her remaining seated while the rest of us stand and kneel.” No, his reaction was not one of tolerance, but of loving his neighbor as himself.

Jesus saw her, reached out to her and healed her. He exemplified compassion and a sense of humility by acknowledging her value when he refers to her as, “daughter of Abraham.” As a daughter of Abraham, she has the right to share in the community of the people of God and salvation, just as much as the leader of the synagogue. And how does she respond? By thanking God – not Jesus, but God! She attributes her healing to God, not the man Jesus. And Jesus is perfectly happy with that because that’s the way it ought to be. Give God the glory. She demonstrates her understanding of the law and Jewish history. She accepted and celebrated her blessings through her attendance at sabbath worship and now by standing tall, claiming her liberation as a daughter of Abraham and a child of God.

Putting ourselves into the shoes of another person does not necessarily mean we can really identify with his or her situation. Sometimes, the best we can do is gain some intellectual understanding. This story of a healing in the synagogue calls us to try to see those who are bent double by circumstances or prejudice or the blindness of society and, insofar as possible, put ourselves where they are. We are challenged to reach out as Jesus did and initiate healing through relationship. Once we have done that, we will be in a good position to see how we can go about loving our neighbors in ways that are compassionate, dignifying and uplifting. Heed Jesus’ words and embody the way – by seeking relationship with others; acknowledging them, hearing their stories and being ready to celebrate their liberation and empowerment.

AMEN