

Gospel - Luke 13: 10-17

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon 8.25.19

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Learning from the Bent Over Woman

There is so much richness in this relatively short scripture passage, so many themes we could explore about the nature of the Sabbath, about our human tendency to put rules and regulations around our humanity, about Jesus' ministry and his words and actions that illuminate the differences between the spirit of the law and the letter of it, so that we might learn to choose the law of love above any other.

But it is the bent over woman herself who draws me most deeply into this gospel reading and sparks my curiosity:

Who is this bent over woman?

How old is she?

Is she married, widowed?

Who is she living with?

What is her role in the household and community?

What happened to her body, and how did her physical ailment impact her spirit with each passing year?

Given the time period, did her family and community think her condition was a result of her sin?

Did they care for her, or ostracize her, or perhaps both?

Did she fight against her body's limitations in the beginning?

Did she injure herself more by refusing to admit to her limitations?

If she'd fought against this new reality, when did she stop fighting?

And what sort of "giving up" was it? Resignation or acceptance?

Had anyone tried to help her? Had she sought out cures?

Did she come to the synagogue faithfully, or did she come that day just to see Jesus?

Had she planned to ask him for healing?

How had he noticed her?

Why had he chosen to heal her and not someone else?

What happened to the woman after the commotion of her healing died down?

How did the people in her life and synagogue treat her after her healing?

How did her daily life change?

Was it Jesus' words or his touch, or both that brought about her healing?

In what ways did the healing of her body return her to her former life?

And in what ways did it close her off to her former life yet open up to a new one?

In what ways did this healing impact her body, mind and spirit?

Does healing have to come in one dramatic moment, or can it be gradual?

Most of my questions can't be answered. But I want to understand the story of the woman in Luke's gospel and learn about healing from it because I have both been a bent over woman myself, and I love and have cared for a bent over woman.

The bent over woman I love and have cared for has been bound by physical, emotional, and spiritual pain for over thirty years, a crippling that wouldn't be a stretch to attribute to Satan, as does Jesus in this gospel. The experience of being in relationship with her impacted me deeply.

I have seen abuse and physical and emotional pain cripple a person beyond recognition; have seen it twist a smiling and joyful girl whose eyes sparkle with mischief and glee into a scowling bitter woman whose eyes are dulled by anger and despair.

I have seen an injured woman live in a constant state of lament over the loss of "her old life" and abilities, aiming scornful jealousy and judgment at those who can do things she can't, believing that no one else struggles as she does.

I have accompanied a woman to scores of medical, therapy, and social service appointments where she demanded treatment and cures but believed she was nothing more than a victim of uncaring and incompetent professionals aligned to keep her hurting and helpless.

I've seen a woman plagued with mental illness make terrible decisions, and fall into addiction, poisoning her body and mind with drugs and abusive relationships in an effort to escape or numb her pain.

I have seen a person feeling stripped of dignity, trapped in dependency, resentful of those who offer help, and equally resentful of those who ignore her.

I have seen a woman demand that family and friends “feel her pain” and punish them when they don’t sympathize adequately.

I have seen a woman make decisions that sabotage her own safety, until she ended up on the streets, isolated and alone, unable to love herself or anyone else.

I have seen the spiral into hopelessness and inability to cope with or carry one’s psychic or physical pain. I have heard suicide threats and reports of psychiatric holds. I have called a hospital day-after-day waiting for news of whether the bent over woman would recover from the overdose meant to end her life.

There are moments, despite my love for her, and despite my own faith, when I do not think I can bear another moment of her suffering and despair. I want Jesus to heal my bent over woman. I want him to say as he did to the daughter of Abraham: “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And I want him to do it now—or to have done it already, decades ago.

Each of us has been bent low in some way, crippled by illness or disease, by infirmity or job loss or natural disaster or divorce or grief or violence or any number of human experiences that derail our plans and identities. And our healing, and how, or when, or if it comes in this lifetime, can be unexpected and mysterious.

I became a literal bent over woman in January 2016. I was crawling under bushes to dig out Himalayan blackberries by the roots when I felt a sharp twinge in my back. I hobbled into the house for a dose of ibuprofen and ice, but within a few days I couldn’t put weight on my right leg without crumpling.

My husband drove me to Urgent Care that evening, and to the ER the next as the pain got worse. I was given a shot, prescription anti-inflammatory, painkillers, muscle relaxer, a pair of crutches, and told to rest.

I spent weeks mostly laying on one side in a near-fetal position, unable move freely. Pain made me tired, grumpy, weepy, and narrowed my world. Sometimes my consciousness extended no further than my body as I sought a pain-free breath.

I was completely dependent on my husband for dressing, bathing, meals, transportation, shopping, laundry, and housework. Though I was grateful for his uncomplaining generosity, it humbled me not to be able to contribute to our household, and to accept so much help.

A month after the injury, I felt worse and not better. My doctor thought the initial diagnosis of a sprained iliac ligament and inflamed sciatic nerve, might be a herniated lumbar disk, and recommended an MRI, which my insurance wouldn't pay for, saying I hadn't suffered long or severely enough.

I certainly felt I'd suffered long and severely enough so my husband and I, who were strapped for cash at the time, decided to charge the MRI to our credit card. I shared a prayer request on Facebook with my family and friends, and within an hour of scheduling the appointment, my father called and offered to pay for the procedure, though I hadn't asked.

I hadn't recognized until that moment that there had already been some gifts in my suffering: In pain and illness, the trivial and irrelevant had been stripped away. Though I spent much of each day zoning out watching HGTV, I also appreciated daily life with a heightened awareness and gratitude: the beauty of sunrise and sunset, the melody rain on the roof, the many ways my body had so often done what I asked without protest.

Accepting that I couldn't cook or clean or even wash my hair and being vulnerable enough to ask for and receive help was part of my healing. As was accepting money for the MRI. It was gift I couldn't repay. A gift given in love by my father who wanted to relieve my suffering and couldn't; but could do this.

I'd never had an MRI before, and I didn't know I was claustrophobic until I was confined in that coffinlike tube with magnets banging like a jet turbine rattling my teeth and nerves. To quell panic, I brought hymns to mind, but my favorites, like "Morning Has Broken," and "All Things Bright and Beautiful" were too happy for the circumstances. It was early February and Lent. I needed a hymn of lament and "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," floated into consciousness where I repeated the lyrics in my mind like a mantra.

I latched onto Jesus and the words of his wounding, for who and what else could be present with me there? Not the technician who was only a disembodied voice speaking via microphone between scans. Not my husband in the waiting room. Not even my wedding ring stashed in a locker with my clothes.

In the middle of that MRI, clinging to Jesus, I knew that I would be healed no matter what images the machine generated, no matter what sort of treatment I would or wouldn't receive. I knew because people I love—like my father who lost an eye and half his palette, teeth, and cheekbone to sinus cancer—had suffered much worse, and were whole despite diagnosis, disease, disability. God did not take the cup from them or from Jesus—though each asked to be spared.

I can't say if my doctor saw Jesus lurking between vertebrae when she read the MRI report, but I felt him—and the knowledge that God will not forsake us penetrated me bone deep. There was nothing more to resist. Somehow, in that blaring machine I was cradled and blessed.

Feeling that blessing, I wondered if anyone had blessed the machine and the room, the technicians, physicians, and janitors who worked here, those who came here like me, under extreme circumstances, and our friends and families, at home, in the lobby, waiting, hoping, fearing, and I cobbled a silent prayer in the final minutes: "May this machine be used for the highest and best good by all who come in contact with it. May those entrusted to operate this equipment do so with great skill and compassion. May all who enter here be comforted."

Jesus spoke healing to the bent over daughter of Abraham, laid hands on her, and she stood up straight for the first time in eighteen years praising him. Two thousand years later on the far side of the resurrection, as I was bent over in pain, he healed me, and I praise him.

Will Jesus heal the bent over woman I love and so many like her who are bound by trauma, abuse, illness, injury, addiction, who are crippled under the weight of so much they cannot bear to carry?

I do not know, but I believe he is able and willing to heal us and waiting for us to come near, like the woman in scripture.

I believe Jesus waits for us to surrender whatever it is that we cling to that stands between us and him.

For the bent over woman I love, that thing might well be her pain. If your pain is all that defines you, the only thing that has remained with you when everything and everyone else has deserted you, who are you without it? How can you possibly let it go and live when you have no idea what will happen? Where can you find that courage?

Where do any of us find the courage when we're bent low? Perhaps in the words of scripture. Perhaps through prayer. Perhaps by opening our eyes and our hearts and listening deeply to the experience of others who have found their way to healing. Perhaps all of these can lead us to take the first steps toward healing.

Being part of this community for the past year, lifting each other up in prayer every Sunday as we worship, kneeling at the altar together as we feed on the bread of life, I look at your dear faces, and I know you know what it is to be bent over. And I know you know what it is to be healed.

I know you know what it is to draw near Jesus and to surrender what you can't control. I see faith in the midst of pain and suffering. I see wholeness and healing. I hear praise as we lift our voices in song.

In a world where so much seems broken, where so many strive after a false illusion of happiness, where so many are bent over, I hear the hurting clamoring for reason to hope, looking for something to believe in.

The daughter of Abraham Jesus set free immediately stood up and praised God, and I want to think that she told her story again and again over the years, to anyone who hadn't heard it, and to those who had, but needed a reminder of God's healing power. I want to imagine that she became a disciple in her own place in her own way.

May we be like the daughter of Abraham. May we stand and speak. May we be emboldened to offer a glimmer of hope to those who are hurting, sharing not doctrine or theology, but the truth of our lives, the stories of our own pain and suffering, and the ways in which we risked opening ourselves to God's presence to be healed by an outpouring of grace and love.

