

THE BENT OVER WOMAN

August 21, 2016

Luke 13: 10-17

Our story today is about the bent over woman. That is what she is called and what history has labelled her. She is named for what is wrong with her, by, we assume, that debilitating condition that we see so often even today when one is bent so far over that one can only see the ground, so that to look up and to meet someone's gaze must be the most painful of moments. We have all probably known or seen people afflicted in this way, something we think of now as a disease of aging like osteoporosis or scoliosis, something we all try to avoid by doing our exercises and taking our calcium. Imagine in this condition, one is so bent over that the world may be mostly unseen and only the ground beneath can be given close examination. In the days that the gospel examines, there must have been many people in this situation for yoga classes were not exactly the norm in ancient Galilee. She has had this condition, this spirit of infirmity, for eighteen years, the story tells us, when she comes into the synagogue that sabbath day. And she must have come into the back of the synagogue for that is where the women sit while the men sit in front, so that they would not be distracted from their prayers, by thoughts of women. That we can discuss at another time. But the bent over woman, coming in at the back, would have been difficult for Jesus to have seen, unless it was that she arrived after everyone else, hunched over, with her cane, looking for her seat, perhaps stumbling a bit over other people.

But let us just examine the language for a moment, because this woman is not only “bent over”, but she has a “spirit of infirmity”, or, in another translation, a spirit that had crippled her, and later it says “bound” her - yes, Jesus says that Satan had bound her for eighteen years. So we are not talking here only about the diminishment of the physical package, but of an invasion of a spirit that causes the woman to be bent over in weakness or shame or unhappiness. She is held in some kind of bondage that keeps her bound down, gazing at the ground so that she cannot invest herself in the life that is around her.

Now, we do not know what spirit had crippled this woman. Though Jesus says that Satan has bound her, held her in bondage, we don't know exactly what that means.

“It could have been something that happened to her as a child or an adult... human being can do unspeakable thing to each other and especially to the weak. Something can be experienced that is so traumatic it leaves one unable to move on. It could have been some kind of daily mistreatment or abuse; it could have been a relationship at home that was unhealthy, that took her ability to stand up straight gradually over time.

“It could have been an addiction of some kind, and certainly they were present in the first century as well as in the 21st. Every time one's behavior is altered to accommodate that addiction, we are crippled even more.

“Once one is under the power of that spirit, it can seem like there is no way out. There's no getting away from it. It envelopes you, surrounds you and

you get to the point where it threatens to overwhelm you. And after trying to stand up to it for so long, you can begin to feel that your only defense is to just embrace it, and worse, to accept it. This is just who I am now, you say. And you begin to identify yourself and to let others identify you based on that spirit. “He’s self-centered; she’s lazy; he’s fat; she’s alcoholic; he’s neurotic,” and so forth. So we begin to identify ourselves by these labels and to be ashamed of them and of ourselves. But a life lived in shame is not easy to navigate. So we spend our lives with a cane in our hand slipping in late and making our way to the back corner of the room, hunched over because we can’t stand to look anyone in the eye... can’t stand to look ourselves in the eye. *This is the bent over woman!* She is everyone who has ever struggled to rise above the pain of oppression and low self-worth and judgement from others. She is everyone who has struggled with illness, addictions, loss of value, loss of spouse, of self-esteem or innocence. She is anyone who has lived in a situation that is intolerable, anyone who has been told “you can’t” and believed it... anyone who has lost hope.”*

And Jesus recognizes that bent over woman as someone that he can liberate. She does not come to him seeking freedom from her pain and oppression. No, he singles her out and calls her to him. “Woman, you are set free from your affliction.” or “loosed from your infirmity.” And he puts his hands on her and she stands up straight... for the first time in eighteen years. And how does this happen? Well, it is a miracle, of course, and those are by definition not really explicable, but one can see how it might have been. It might have been that when Jesus called to her it spoke to something deep inside her that recalled the she, the woman, the person that she was before she had been bound, and that memory, that tiny spark

gave her the desire and the power to stand when Jesus' hands were laid on her. It was a freeing, a casting off of bonds, a realization that because of Jesus' recognition of her, that, yes, she could do it.

But then the ruler of the synagogue is also enslaved, is he not? He is not oppressed by being physically bent double (Greek original), but by an allegiance to a false sense of piety and religious necessity. He tells Jesus that he is not allowed to perform miracles on the Sabbath so that what he (Jesus) has done in freeing the woman is wrong and he tells him this because he, the leader of the synagogue, is imprisoned by the rules. Of course, Jesus responds that he is a hypocrite, for he lets his animals free to go to water on the Sabbath; why then cannot the woman be freed from her afflictions on the same day? Does the ruler of the synagogue achieve the same liberation as the woman does by Jesus' words? We don't really know and are left to ponder. Some books say that he was only shamed because his power was compromised by Jesus, that in the end he was part of the group that brought about Jesus' death.

But Jesus is a revolutionary and the consequence of that is to free some of the people and bring them joy and a new life, and the rest of the people, well, to make them mad as hell and to want to get back at you.

People are still being set free by Jesus all the time. When I was studying to be a lay pastor, many of my co-students spoke of their struggles with drugs and alcohol and how it was that they had escaped from the bondage of that addiction through faith in Jesus, through the study of his words, through the inspiration of his being. In the framework of today's gospel, they became

open to the world again instead of being bent double in the prison of oppressive need. What a change it must have been for them. What relief! What peace! It was a revelation to me at that time to hear their stories.

But then of course, it is clear that it not just drugs and alcohol that may oppress us, but any of the habits of our human life - habits of greed and self-centeredness and neediness - all those things that are the opposite of love and open heartedness. Our life today often looks full of nasty challenges and mean language. Sometimes you just want to close the door and hug the cat. The goal is to stand up straight, open oneself to the world, and make oneself of use. That is what Jesus calls on humanity to do for that way lies love and that way lies salvation. Not just for us, but for the world. That is what he called on the bent over woman to do long ago in that synagogue in Galilee, and that is what he calls us to do right here today.

* Online posting "Where the Spirit Simmers" in Theological Stew