

“She Stood up Straight and Praised God”
Luke 13:10-17
Sunday, August 21, 2016
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

Opening.

One night at Birdland, the legendary jazz bar, Cab Calloway was introducing a promising young saxophone player. As the sax player finished his set, a self-appointed jazz critic came over to him and said, in front of Cab, “You aren’t that good, man. All you can do is play like Charlie Parker.”

Cab took the young man’s sax and handed it over to the critic. “Here,” he said, “you play it like Charlie Parker.”

Isn’t it true that whenever you are trying to do something significant, somebody comes around to criticize? Critics. The world is full of them. (as quoted by King Duncan)

Jesus is constantly criticized by the religious and political leaders of his time. In our gospel reading for this morning, the synagogue leader criticizes him for healing on the Sabbath. In this healing story, Jesus restores a woman who had been crippled and bent-over for 18 years.

I. The bent-over woman.

Can anyone here relate to the bent-over woman? I know I can. I suspect many of you can, as well. There are days, aren’t there, when our shoulders slump, and we feel the weight of the world bearing down on us. Gravity pulls on our head ‘til our chin nearly touches our chest. We feel dragged down, weighed down, bent over.

I am sensitive to the fact that, for some of us, being literally bent over is a daily experience. My father, who is 88 years old, has severe back pain and spinal issues; he walks in a

twisted, bent-over manner, to avoid the pain as much as anything else.

We are like the bent over woman. Jesus is ready to heal, even before we ask. Healing does not always come in the form we want, but it always comes.

We can praise God. We can “stand up straight” in our souls, if not in our bodies. Sometimes God heals the body in this life. Sometimes not. God is always ready to heal the soul, if we are ready to receive that healing.

Katherine Hilliard, I think, beautifully captures the pain and the healing of this story: “A woman appeared with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. I wonder if the spirit's name was scoliosis. I imagine the woman bent forward with a large hump on one side of her back, struggling to breathe. He called her to him, invited her to choose to make her way close to him. He gently prepared her for the healing he offered by his announcement: ‘You are set free.’ Then when he saw that she was ready and that she wanted this freedom, he laid hands on her and allowed his power and his love to release her from suffering. She knew immediately that God welcomed her praise. But the leader of the synagogue was annoyed. This wasn't the sort of disorder he wanted in his synagogue. Jesus called him (and us) hypocrites for resenting the surprises of God's freedom. We are often tied to the safety of our manger, our food stores, our little boxes where we have found both nourishment and condemnation. Jesus sets us free to come to the water of life that flows from him in a limitless stream.”

II. Jesus breaks the rules.

Jesus breaks the rules. If we consider the story from the perspective of the synagogue leader we might understand his critical attitude. It is often important for a leader to hold the line, to adhere to the rules of an organization. Sometimes leaders have to uphold unpopular rules or laws for the sake of order. People often demand “exceptions” to the rules, at least for

themselves. It can be difficult to discern when a truly exceptional situation requires the bending or breaking of the rules.

One scholar suggests that Jesus' action represents a revolution happening in seven short verses. In this short story, Jesus tries to wake people up to the kind of life God wants for them. He often talks about the Kingdom of God where people have equal worth and all of life has dignity. But in the latter part of his ministry, he begins to act this out. In the midst of a highly patriarchal culture Jesus breaks at least six strict cultural rules:

1. Jesus speaks to the woman. In civilized society, Jewish men do not speak to women. Remember the story in John 4 where Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well. She is shocked because a Jew would speak to a Samaritan. But when the disciples return, “They [are] astonished that he [is] speaking with a woman” (John 4:27). In speaking to her, Jesus jettisons the male restraints on women’s freedom.

2. Jesus calls her to the center of the synagogue. By placing her in the geographic middle, he challenges the notion of a male monopoly on access to knowledge and to God.

3. Jesus touches her, which revokes the holiness code. This is the code that protects men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness.

4. Jesus calls her “daughter of Abraham,” a term not found in any of the prior Jewish literature. This is revolutionary because it was believed that women were saved through their men. To call her a daughter of Abraham is to make her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God.

5. Jesus heals on the Sabbath, the holy day. In doing this he demonstrates God's compassion for people over ceremony, and reclaims the Sabbath for the celebration of God's liberal goodness.

6. Last, and not least, Jesus challenges the ancient belief that her illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. He asserts that she is ill, not because God wills it, but because there is evil in the world. (In other words, bad things happen to good people.)

And Jesus does all this in a few seconds.

(adapted by Mickey Anders, from Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers).

Jesus ushers in a new kingdom, where love is the rule by which all other rules are judged.

III. Joy.

And in the process of exercising his new rule of love, Jesus brings joy to those who have suffered in silence for years.

How many people harbor a secret, hidden feeling of isolation? How many carry a burden so heavy it weighs them down, despite their cheery Sunday morning smiles? How many people do we encounter each day who feel ostracized from society, certain that if people really knew them, they would reject them?

Jesus cuts through the isolating, ostracizing, rejecting nature of human society. Jesus ushers in a kingdom of love. Jesus brings joy. He sees us, as he saw the bent-over woman. He calls us to him, as he called her. He proclaims, “You are set free !” And when he touches us, we are set free indeed.

There’s a substance abuse recovery program called Set Free. Drugs and alcohol are but one example of the ailments that separate us from joy in Christ. Guilt and shame over past sins, fear and hopelessness, past hurts and injuries both emotional and physical. On a social level we can name factors that bend and break us, too – racism, economic disparity, violence, sexism, religious intolerance, unemployment or underemployment, ageism. Just turn on the news these days – or better yet, don’t. The presidential race will drive you crazy; the wars and the fires and

the shootings and the terrorism and the chaos would leave anyone feeling bent over. Or look at the dissension within the church; Christian against Christian; Methodist against Methodist. My head is feeling heavy as I say the words!

Jesus sees us. He sees individuals in our bent-over condition. He sees his Church, bent-over and struggling. He sees humanity as a whole, bent to the breaking point. He calls us to Him. Will we listen? Will we respond? He longs to tell us, "You are set free!" He longs to lay his healing hands on us -- as individuals, as a church, as a society.

He longs to offer the joy that only he can bring.

Closing.

I want to close with Mark Trotter's poignant retelling of the story of the bent-over woman. Trotter is a beloved United Methodist preacher. I suspect we can all see ourselves in this story at times; some of us may identify closely with it today:

"I feel as though I live in a plastic bubble. It surrounds me, but it cannot be seen. I see everyone around me, I hear them speak. Behind their words, they hide from me. They look at me and think they know me. But they don't see my bubble, they don't look long enough to see it. I try to talk with them, to share myself, but my words return, unlistened to. And nobody hears.

"I move through the days insulated in my protective bubble. I reach out to ones that I love, but they don't notice. They don't feel my need. When I extend my hand, no one takes it. Heavy hearted, I withdraw it, vowing never to offer it again. I call to those around, I beg, 'Please, help me. Please touch me. Please love me.' And nobody hears.

"Though not made of plastic my bubble is real. It is comprised of many things. The sting of harsh words, spoken thoughtlessly. The heartache of love unrequited. The disappointment of a trust broken. The guilt of mistakes past. The terror of, again, being rejected.

These things envelop me, isolate me; in my torment I scream, but it is silent. And nobody hears.

“I sought escape from my invisible prison. I looked for someone, some person who would see my bubble and free me of it. I searched for years, to naught. And then, when all seemed hopeless, I turned my eyes in a new direction. There he stood, arms outstretched, beckoning me. He spoke to me. He touched me.

“Then I understood what I should have always known. Through all the empty years and broken dreams, I never had been alone. He was always there, just waiting for me to call. I closed my eyes and whispered, ‘God, please help me. Please touch me. Please love me.’

“And he heard.”

May this joy be yours. May you be set free by the healing hands of Jesus. May you stand up straight and praise God all your life long.

Amen.