A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

“*Straightening Up*”

Luke 13.10-17

August 25, 2019

The story of Jesus’ healing of a woman crippled for 18 long years is an iconic story of God’s healing mercy. And it is so much more. It is a symbol of salvation and liberation. She represents everyone who life has brought low but God has lifted up.

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. The Gospel of Luke doesn’t tell us what he was teaching on or what he was saying, just that he was teaching in the synagogue. Synagogues were a lot like churches are, places where local Jewish people met to worship, fellowship, learn the scriptures and ways of God, and to pray together on the Sabbath day of rest. The gospels include several stories that begin “Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when (dot, dot, dot)” Almost every time, you listen up when you hear “Jesus was teaching in the synagogue” because something really interesting or revolutionary is about to happen.

In the 13th chapter of Luke, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when a woman with a disabling spirit for 18 years came in. If you’d been there, you would have known who she was when you saw her. She was bent over. Luke says it was a disabling spirit that bent her low; that it was the bondage of Satan. She is captive to this curse. She could not fully straighten herself. So, people would have noticed her when she came in to any place she entered, or just as likely, no one would have really seen her. Old woman, bent over like that, she’s just another person who’s awkward to try to talk with, is in such chronic pain that she isn’t particularly fun to talk with, and who is just as easy to not see as to see, easier to ignore than to love.

Jesus *sees* her. Ancient commentators point out the significance of this simple thing. Who God sees God loves, they say. Jesus sees her which means he already loves her. He stops his teaching and calls to her, calls to her to come over, which must have been no small thing for her. The journey from his calling to her arriving at his feet may have been quite a slow, long, painful journey. It took faith for her to do what he said: “Come to me.” It took courage in front of all those people for her to shuffle to him. She had to trust that he intended good, not evil in calling her. She had to trust she was safe. She had to trust she was seen. Luke pays no attention at all to her faith in responding to Jesus’ call, but it’s all right there. He called; she came. She came to him, and there Jesus said to her, “Woman you are set free.” And immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.

This is an icon of grace. Diseased, now healed. Bent, now standing with dignity. Afflicted, now set free. Touched by Jesus and healed. She represents the need for salvation for all of us, all of us--women, men, children, old and young. Being bent is a spiritual image of a life in need of redemption. CS Lewis, in one of his Space Trilogy novels, imagines a whole planet of people, the whole population of that planet as ruled by the malevolent Bent One who wants to keep them all bent until they forget they were made to stand up straight. In his story, that’s Earth.

It’s almost impossible to read this story this week and not think of people who suffer in all the ways humans are bent low by physical disability and the crushing weight that so many people carry on their shoulders and in their hearts. Sometimes I’m amazed talking with some of you and what you’re dealing with how you get out of bed in the morning, how you put on your shoes and leave the house, how you stand up to face another day. There’s a strength in you that sometimes I stand in awe of.

If you wonder about that for yourself, you’re not alone. The burdens carried are legion, a litany of life in modern times: stress, financial concerns, family discord, secret addictions, the gap between the work you once believed you would do and the reality of life you’re living, grief at what and who have been lost. Add to this what I always remind the staff: never underestimate the arresting insecurity that many people deal with when they walk out the front door and into a crowd. Then I must add, the most potent of all: shame. People all around you feel shame: for not living up to the Bible, or their own expectations, or some loop that plays in their heads in the voice of their parents or a teacher or an abusive spouse. The words are different, but the message is the same: you’re not good enough; you’ve done bad; you are bad; you’re a failure.

That’s enough to crush a person’s spirit, at least to bend them over to the ground. And so, this healing story is an image of all who have been touched by Jesus in some way and have been healed from this crushing burden; they’ve been stood up straight, set free—even if it is just enough strength for one day. We can easily see the image true in our own lives; we can easily see how our sins distort our beings until our spirits are misshapen, crooked, twisted, warped. That’s what sin does; it takes good and twists it. Made in the image of God to walk with him in faith, we instead are bent low, spiritually crippled. We need a savior to straighten us out, and he comes, calling, “Come to me.” So, whether it is from our sins from which we are delivered or the pains that we carry that are released, we come, and we are healed.

The vocabulary of God’s redemption through Jesus in our lives in all kinds of ways is woven all through this story: liberation, healing, restoration, wholeness. In Christ, by his cross and resurrection, his touch of saving grace, people are set free to live. People are healed; they are restored to the image of God; they are made whole. No wonder the woman immediately praised God from whom all blessings flow. On that day, it must have felt like they were flowing for her.

Touched by Jesus, now standing up straight as an arrow pointing to heaven, she is an icon of the world set free from its brokenness—all the different kinds of brokenness--by the liberating grace of God.

To be forgiven from sin by grace. Yes, this is the liberation Christ gives. But this is not all. Because it’s not just personal sin that can crush a person. It’s not just the pain we carry in our hearts that can cripple us and bend us over. And it’s not just individual sin and pain that is met by the liberating mercy and grace in the kingdom of God, but if it were, that would be enough. But even that does not begin to exhaust the grace of God.

God’s grace has mercy to save individuals from their sins. We are given this grace and invited to receive it.

God’s grace has compassion to heal our woundedness and empowers us to stand and walk another day. We are given this grace and invited to share it with those around us who are hurting, too. Thanks be to God.

God’s grace has power to challenge anything in the world crushing God’s children under its weight. We are given this grace and challenged to change the world.

It’s hard to see it some days, it’s hard to have hope, but the Bible promises us that the inauguration of the kingdom of God is the beginning of the end of all that afflicts us and all that afflicts others--injustice, oppression, violence. The Kingdom of God is the kingdom of love made flesh. Luke says this woman has been set free from Satan’s bondage. She is not just an icon of personal salvation from personal sin though she is that. She is not just a symbol of healed woundedness though she is that, too. She is a symbol of everything twisted made straight, wrong made right. The powers and principalities manifest in systems of injustice make victims of even the righteous among us. Jesus inaugurates the kingdom of God to free all of us from all that bends us all low and calls us all to come to him from wherever we are, however long it takes, and be part of the new world being recreated in him.

We all need a word of life, a touch of mercy to help us stand and walk into the new world being recreated in Christ. Even Jeremiah, the young would-be prophet prodigy empowered by God to announce the end of the old world of injustice and to build a new world of shalom was utterly immobilized by terror at what God was calling him to do. “I don’t know how to do any of that, I’m too young to do that,” he protested. That’s when God touched him and assured him, “Do not be afraid. I will be with you.” They seem to be some of God’s favorite words.

An empowering word for Jeremiah. A healing word for the woman in Luke. A liberating word of love for all the world. The truth is that people who are suffering are more than just objects of pity, charity, or derision. In suffering, we have power to bless others. The story we heard this morning about the experience of receiving eucharist from a refugee speaks profoundly of the spiritual journey we share with one another toward wholeness. We went to serve and were served; we went to help and were helped; we went thinking we could straighten out some problems and were instead extended grace from one whose vulnerable station in life is belied by her mighty faith.

Many of us could probably name the three kinds of vulnerable people most often named in the Bible: orphans, widows, and sojourners in the land. Those three are all over the pages of the Bible from the Old Testament into the New Testament: orphans, widows, sojourners in the land. Care for them; do not neglect them. The Prophets, the Apostles, and the Lord all said: our faith and worship are judged by how we do this. “Do no harm to the stranger, the fatherless, the widow,” Jeremiah would thunder to the people of God. (22.3)

We have no way of knowing whether the woman in Luke’s story was an orphan from her parents, a widow from her husband, or a sojourner from a foreign land, but she could have been any or all three. She certainly wore the body of one who had suffered. But Jesus doesn’t use her as an object lesson of how society should develop policies and laws about orphans, widows, immigrants, or sick people; he doesn’t use her to make a point about social security funding, immigration law, or healthcare policy. She is not there as an advertisement, a talking point, or an argument about whether Jesus should be healing people on the Sabbath, though some people wanted to make it all about that. Those problems are for another day. She is there. She is here. Right here. Flesh and blood. Soul and body. Right there; right here. We didn’t see her but now in Christ, we do. So now what? What are you going to do now?

Mercy leads and where mercy leads, lives are saved and the kingdom of God is near. So very near. And it’s there, on that holy ground, that we see with clearer eyes the full truth we’d missed in our blinded-ness.

No wonder she’s so bent over; look what’s on her back. She’s carrying us to the feet of Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

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