

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
August 26, 2007

Luke 13:10-17

Out of the Shadows and Into the Light

A story is told about a little girl living in a rural community. It was just a few years ago, but it was one of those towns where driving down Center Street is like driving back into the thirties. She lived in a little house and went to a two-room school. She had loving folks and, from time to time, a good teacher. But the way she was growing up was not the way you would want your little girl to grow up. She had a cleft palate and the money for the repair hadn't been there. By the time she was seven, she knew what the world was. She had heard the phrase, "only a mother could love that" and she understood it.

One day a special teacher visited the school and put the children through some basic speech tests. When it was her turn, the little girl went into the classroom that had been set aside for the exams. "Just stand over there by the door," the teacher said from her desk at the far end of the room. "I want to test your hearing first. Turn your back, face the door and tell me what you hear me say."

"Apple," the teacher said in a low voice.

"Apple," the little girl repeated.

"Man," the teacher said.

"Man," the little girl repeated.

"Banana."

"Banana."

"Okay," the teacher said, "Now a sentence." The child knew that the sentences were usually fairly easy—she wasn't the first child to take the test, after all. She'd heard you could expect something like, "The sky is blue" or "Are your shoes brown?" Still, she listened very carefully.

So it was that standing with her face against the door, she heard the teacher's whisper quite clearly, "I wish you were my little girl."

The Gospel reading is about healing—but it is also about the sabbath, and the sabbath proved to be both a benefit and a burden to Christians—and also to Jews laboring to be faithful but to get things done in the everyday world.

The narrative speaks repeatedly of **binding and loosing**...a woman who was "bound by Satan" for eighteen years by being physically bent over is released (untied, loosened) from her disability by Jesus. This may have been a regular healing story, like the one about the woman cured of the hemorrhage (Luke 8:42-48), but this one took place on a Sabbath and in a synagogue while Jesus was leading the service, creating a little tempest for the elders. Thus we have in fact a combination of a healing story and a controversy story. The controversy, which comes up several times, is about what is permitted on the Sabbath—or, perhaps, how far should Sabbath observance be pressed.

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The President of the Congregation (the Greek title is literally “synagogue-chief”) may have been “indignant” because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, but he is discrete in dealing with the problem. He does not address Jesus directly, but says to the crowd who is present, “There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day” (verse 14, NRSV). The fault lies with the needy, not with the healer. Don't come on the wrong day!

Jesus asserts that this is quite ridiculous, even hypocritical, and appeals to an example of what IS permitted on the Sabbath. It is permitted to untie (literally “loose”) a work animal to take it to water (verse 15). Therefore, how much more appropriate to release a suffering human, Sabbath or no.

The early followers of Jesus labored with the issue of how much of Jewish law and tradition applied to them. They understood most of the Ten Commandments to be binding on them, but by the second century, Christians (as they were then called) no longer observed the sabbath (the fourth Commandment) but observed “the Lord's Day” instead. For a couple of generations—between the time of the disciples and the circulation of written Gospels—many decisions had to be made in detail about what law applied to Jesus followers and what did not. These decisions were made step by step by those who were understood to have received authority from Jesus. In Matthew, Peter is given this authority. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:19).

Thus in time Christians were guided to make decisions about what was permitted and what was not. Luke's story, and others like it, stood as forceful reminders that, among Jesus' followers, compassion for human suffering must take precedent over all religious formalities.

Among Jesus' followers, compassion for human suffering must take precedent over all religious formalities. This is the example that the Gospels show us of Jesus over and over again. The story says that Jesus called her over and laid his hands on her. I wonder how that happened. I imagine that it might have looked something like this.

Jesus called her near. I can't imagine that Jesus did not look at this woman, who until this day was most likely invisible to those around her. The Greek word translated for bent over would be better translated bent together or bent with. This is a woman who is bent in on herself. It's a picture of someone who has not only

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born the yoke but bought it. She is not just a woman with an infirmity but, as Luke says, with the spirit of an infirmity.

Whatever it was that had bent her, whatever emotional or physical burden she had born, Luke suggests, ultimately became part of her until her very body was conformed to its image. There is nothing she can do now to help herself out of the spiritual pretzel her life has become. I imagine that Jesus had no choice but to get down on his knees—way down on his knees, down in the dirt on his knees—and crane his neck up to look into her face.

Then he touches her. The text says “he laid his hands on her.” Down on his knees, Jesus most likely put his hands on her feet, the only thing she had seen for 18 years.

The scene Luke describes is a dizzy one—a familiar picture taken out of the frame and put back in upside down. Ancient Israel had a very nice painting of the God whose feet we grasp. The God whose ankles we throw our arms around. The God to whose skirts we cling. Luke introduces the God who gets down on hands and knees with us. Luke’s God is a God who runs to fall on the neck of the prodigal and the feet of the broken. A God who bends to us...when we cannot even lift our own head!

We have a God, Luke assures us, who is empathetic and gentle; whose kindness is unfathomable. We have a God who cranes, who reaches, who loves us before faith kicks in and when it gives out. Don’t let anybody tell you that you have to scrape yourself together and run to God, that you have to screw up your will to do the right thing, that you have to dig deep and find your faith and offer it to God before God will speak to you. You have a God who loves you, who yearns for you, who, as the poet Roberta Bondi reminds us, is in love with you.

It may be possible theologically to overstate God’s power. I don’t know. It’s an interesting theological problem. But I’ll tell you what I do know. According to Luke, there is no overstating the tenderness of God’s love. Or the healing power of that tenderness.

This is the example of compassion that the Gospels offered to the early followers of Jesus and the example that we still have today. How do we offer compassion to those bent together and bound by the cultural expectations of our society? Are we willing to stand up for the mother bent over with the struggle of providing for her family on minimum wage and no benefits? Are we willing to stand up those bent

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over by racism? Are we willing to stand up for those who are bent over because of their sexual orientation? Are we willing to stand up for those who are bent over because of their intellectual ability or physical appearance?

While I am fully aware of the commitment this church has made to be a place of welcome to all the people, I am also fully aware that it is easy to become comfortable in our own community and forget that there are still those of us here who are confronted by hostility and hatred outside these walls. We cannot rest just because we get it. There are still so many others who do not see that God loves us all and only see the issue, not the person.

We stake a claim as a community of faith, a community who follows Jesus, that God loves all the people. And that claim, I believe, requires that we confront injustice outside these walls. That is never easy. We forget that it cost Jesus his life. But it is a cost that continues to transform lives as Jesus' compassion touches us in the bent over places of our lives. Will we allow the compassionate touch of Jesus to help us stand up straight? Will we tell others of how God has transformed us? Will we go forth to spread the good news that God loves all the people?

“He Touched Me”