

“she was bent over....”
A Sermon for the Federated Church in Thomaston
Thomaston, Maine
Sunday, August 25, 2019
Rev. Dr. Susan Stonestreet
Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. Luke 13:10-17

Will you pray with me. Healing God, we come to you bent over in so many ways. We come to you with prayers for those whom we know and love who are bent over, too. Help us all to stand tall, in spirit if not in body, this day, O God, for what ails so many of us is too heavy to bear without your arm to lean on. Amen.

Whenever I read our text for today, the story of “the bent over woman of Luke,” I think of the first time I experienced the telling of it. It happened before I began my second semester of seminary back in January of 1996. I decided to go to a weekend retreat at the Marie Joseph Spiritual Center in southern Maine. It’s a Catholic retreat center. The theme for the weekend was this story. I thought it would be a good first experience beyond the seminary walls with a biblical text I found intriguing.

I’ll never forget Friday night. Forty-five women had signed up for this retreat – forty-three of whom were Catholic. I and one other woman, who was a Jungian therapist on an around-the-world spiritual journey, were the only non-Catholics there. I felt like a Protestant fish out of water, as the saying goes, but the Catholic women and the Jungian therapist seemed nice as we had our opening gathering to get to know one another.

The person who was to lead the retreat hadn’t appeared yet. All we knew was that her name was “Sister Susan.” At the appointed time, the door to the room in which we were seated in a big circle opened and a beautiful young woman, bent over, seated in a wheel chair, was ushered into the room. The silence among us as she was wheeled into our circle was almost palpable. She began reading this passage. Bent over, with the quietest and most lilting voice I’ve ever heard, she read, “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over...” (Lk 13:10-11)

I will never forget that moment. Hearing Doug read the beginning of the passage this morning was wonderful. Hearing Sister Susan read it in its entirety was an epiphany for me. Bent over, reading of Jesus’ healing of another bent over woman, she brought me

to a level of appreciation of the stories of Jesus I could not have known in an earlier time or in another way.

I don't know if Sister Susan is still alive. That weekend retreat took place twenty-three years ago. She was probably thirty or so at the time and very crippled already from MS. She drank through a straw while someone else held her cup, as she couldn't use her hands at all. The story of the bent over woman of Luke is carved in my memory because of Sister Susan.

Of course, the story has two obvious themes, maybe more – first Jesus' healing powers – this time healing a bent over woman *who doesn't even ask for healing*. She's just come to worship at the synagogue, as others had, not seeking healing, not saying anything at first, but seeking God in the Jewish context of synagogue worship on the sabbath. We might consider this story as just one more example in the Gospels of the many healings of physical ailments that Jesus performed in his short time in ministry. We can continue to ask the question though – why did Jesus heal this woman who did not ask to be healed? What do you think? (get responses)

It could have been Jesus healed to show the religious officials of his day that he had been sent by God and was empowered to bring new and renewed life to those who thought they were as good as dead. Sometimes leaders in our day call upon God, or Jesus, to affirm their political or social or religious power. Sometimes that's with good intentions. Sometimes.... it isn't.

It might have been Jesus healed to convince those who were in need of healing that there was a saving grace from God that he had been authorized to offer them. Many of us today rely on God, on Jesus, in times of darkest despair and death-dealing illness.

It could have been Jesus was simply a divine man of deep compassion and caring for people, particularly those in the worst of situations.... and he couldn't help himself from offering what he knew he had in him – the gift of God's healing become human. Many of us do profess Jesus as the healer who makes us whole, the link to God who calls us to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

The bottom line is -- Jesus got people's attention with his healings. Actions speak louder than words – it's a trite saying, but it's true. Jesus "laid his hands on [the bent over woman and] immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." (Lk 13:13) How cool is that?

But it wasn't cool to the leader of the synagogue. Here's the rest of the story beyond what Doug read for us. (Lk 13:14) "But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." (Lk 13:14-17)

The sabbath – it has so many meanings. How we are to understand the sabbath is the second obvious theme of this passage, it seems to me.

What does the word sabbath mean to you? (get responses) My computer thesaurus defines sabbath in two ways – first as “Sunday, observed by most Christians as the day of worship and rest from work,” and second as “Saturday, observed as a day of religious worship and rest from work in Judaism and some Christian denominations.”

For many people, sabbath doesn’t mean worship at all. It only means a day off from the work they’re paid to do, a day to get chores done around the house, a day to go to the mall or to Home Depot, a day to sleep or have a barbeque, or a day to get the kids to the Sunday morning soccer match. The sabbath doesn’t mean a day that holds religious meaning and symbolism for a lot of people in this 21st century. When I was growing up, sabbath, Sunday, was the day I played golf with my father and brothers – because it was the only day my father didn’t work. Sunday had no religious meaning to my family for many years.

But sabbath, was and is important to Jewish rabbis and to Christian ministers. In Jesus’ day, controlling the activities allowed on the sabbath provided some Jewish officials a way to control people. When you can tell someone how to behave and what is expected of them and they follow you – you have power. The religious leaders in Jesus’ day who had this power did not take kindly to this young upstart – healing on the sabbath! How DARE he!? They could not allow that to happen. People who have power over others don’t like it when that power is threatened or questioned.

One of the ideas we’d best not forget when we think of Jesus is written by theologian and preacher, Fred Craddock. He states, “It is important to remember that which Luke never tires of telling: all that Jesus says and does is within the bosom of Judaism. By his faithfulness, Jesus affirms the Sabbath, the Scriptures, and the synagogue. Jesus not only attends synagogue services regularly but he participates, as all male adults were permitted to do, by reading Scripture and commenting on it.”¹

Jesus was making a statement of the most dramatic kind in healing a bent over woman on the sabbath:

He touched her, a woman – not his wife, which was not allowed in his time, and he healed her on the day that the religious officials said also was not allowed. For Jesus, human compassion came before proper religious form or societal rules. Mercy trumped law in Jesus’ mind and heart.

For Jesus, the sabbath was meant to honor God and to serve one’s fellow human companions at any cost and in any way necessary.

OF COURSE he healed the bent over woman on the sabbath. What else could he do?

A young bent over Catholic nun stricken with MS introduced me to the power of healing by telling the story of the “bent over woman of Luke” in 1996. Who helps you understand the power of healing? Let the people say, “Amen.”

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990, p. 61.