

“When You’re All Bent Over”

Sermon: Year C, Pentecost 26, Proper 28, Lectionary 33

Texts: Isaiah 58:9b–14; Luke 13:10–17

Preached: August 25, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

Grace to you, and peace, from the God who gives the Sabbath for rest, and from Christ Jesus, the Unbender.
AMEN

Have you ever had your back go out on you? I’ve been plagued with back issues since my early 20s, when I was rear-ended in an accident up on Lake Ave. in Glenview on my way to work. In my 30s, it happened again down in Hubbard’s Cave in the city, a multi-car pileup. In my 40s, on busy 95th St. At 60, just this past March, on Sheridan Rd. Those shocks to my spine did not help anything at all. I was seeing a chiropractor already in my 20s, and have had more therapy and cortisone injections and acupuncture and massage and adjustments than is my due. Extra pounds put on in recent years have not helped matters, to be sure. Things have been fairly stable recently, but there have been times that I wake up in the morning and know I’m in trouble. A couple of times I’ve just been walking along and suddenly—bam!—there it is. I’m bent over, and even an attempt to straighten back up makes me dread the wincing pain.

My back woes seem to pale in comparison to those experienced by the woman in today’s Gospel story. For 18 long years, she had moved through her life, face turned toward the ground, bent over by a spirit that had crippled her. Unable to lift her head except with great difficulty, she couldn’t see forward, so she moved almost blindly from place to place. Unable to look into people’s faces, maybe they had stopped even trying to speak to her, or she to them. Unable to stand up straight, she couldn’t even pray properly, because Jews in her day stood straight and tall to address God, faces upturned, arms outstretched. She could stare only at the dirt.

We have no idea what her ailment was. People jump through hoops talking about arthritic conditions, scoliosis, bulging discs, trying to define her illness...but they’re missing the point. I think the gospel writer leaves the cause of her bending an open question for a reason. There are many of us who *are* bent double by physical illness...chronic disease, pain, bodies that just won’t do what we want them to do. And our bodies bend in response to the pain. But there are lots of things that can bend us, and not just physical ailments. How many of us are bent double by worries—worries about finding a job, worries about finances, worries about our relationships, worries about our children, worries about our past, worries about the future? They bend us over as surely as any physical disability, and can be as crippling. And other things can bend our spirits low: addictions, anxieties, depression, disappointments, losses, loneliness...these too can bend us, and ride on our backs like heavy weights. Is there any one of us who has not experienced this crippling of our bodies or of our spirits at some point in our lives?

Like that woman, sometimes we find ourselves unable to stand up straight. We can’t lift our heads enough from our bent condition to see where we are headed, and so we move blindly through life. Absorbed in our difficulties, we may stop seeing those beside us, stop looking into their faces deeply, and we become isolated, lonely. Faces turned earthward, we may find it difficult to lift our hearts in praise of God—we may even begin to doubt that God is really there.

And I would submit that our culture is experiencing one of those “bent-over” times. We’re bent over by anger and political division, we’re bent over by violence, we’re bent over by strife between races, between native-born and immigrant. We’re bent over by greed, we’re bent over by an environment and a climate that are reaching tipping points. We’re bent over by neglected infrastructure. You name it, it’s weighing us down. And in the process, faces turned earthward, no longer seeing our neighbor, many among us have stopped looking toward God for help.

That’s nothing new, really. “There is nothing new under the sun.” The writer of the section of the book of the Prophet Isaiah that we heard a few moments ago was addressing a society that was bent over. Those who had been taken off in exile to Babylon were now returning, and they found cities that had been laid waste by destructive violence and neglect. Those who had remained struggled with poverty. Immigrants who had come into the land during the Exile were now being blamed for the mess. They were being told “Speak Hebrew!” Everyone was pointing a finger and blaming someone else. Houses and public buildings lay in ruins. Potholes weren’t getting fixed. Employers weren’t paying the minimum wage, exploiting their workers. Hungry and homeless folks were everywhere, and those who had resented those who had not. Wealth was extremely unfairly distributed, and the One Percent were ignoring the needs of those who struggled to make ends meet.

Violence roamed the streets of the cities. The religious infrastructure also lay in ruins, just as the Temple lay a pile of toppled stones, and nobody seemed to be able to get organized for rebuilding. Religion for many had become rote observance that didn't really affect the way they lived their daily lives, while many others had simply stopped bothering with religion at all, had simply gotten out of the habit. The Sabbath was being neglected, and that day was being commercialized and had become just like every other day. Does any of this sound familiar? They were bent over. And it was too painful to straighten back up.

But back to the Gospel story. We don't know why the woman came to the synagogue that day. Had she come to pray once more for healing? Had she come out of habit, not expecting anything, resigned to being bent over for the rest of her life? Had she come because she had heard that Jesus would be there, this healer that everyone was talking about? Why does any of us come to this place? Whatever her reason for being there, the story says that Jesus sees her. It must have been hard to see this bent-over woman in that crowd. But he sees her, and he calls her over, and announces to her that she is set free from her ailment. It's interesting, Jesus doesn't say to the woman, "You are healed." Literally, he says "You are *untied* from your weakness." It's the same word he uses to describe the donkey and the oxen, animals who carry heavy burdens who are *untied* on the Sabbath so that they can go quench their thirst. And he lays his hands on her, touches her, and immediately she is set free, is unbent, and stands up straight and begins praising God. Sisters and brothers, this is the good news that Christ Jesus announces to us, as well. When we are bent low, by whatever is bending us, Christ *sees* us, and calls out to us, "Come over here to me." And then he speaks release from all those things that bend us over, and reaches out to touch us, to untie us and free us.

This isn't to say that everything that burdens us will always be cured, that everything will always be fixed and just go away. But it does mean that Christ can set us free from the power those things have over us, can untie us from those things that weigh us down. This God who calls us daughters and sons can cause us to stand upright again, unbent, restored and refreshed, able to turn our faces once again side to side to see our neighbors, able to turn our faces upward and raise our hands in praise of the One who sets us free. With the psalmist, we can say, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name...who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."

It doesn't end there. As unbent, straightened-up people, Christ then puts you and me into the unbinding and unbending business, as well. The scriptures today are pretty plain about the fact that Sabbath is not purely about coming to church and singing praises. It's also about helping to restore other people to wholeness. The words directed to the opponents in the synagogue are not just some kind of debate about Jesus' own actions. I should point out that Jesus is reminding them that Torah and the rabbinical tradition specifically encourages acts of mercy on the Sabbath, even if that means violating the requirement not to work, so he's not telling them something new...he's calling them back to the heart of God's law, which is to show mercy and tender concern for those who are suffering in any way. They are also a challenge from Jesus to all those gathered there to be about the work of healing, all of them, out of simple compassion and mercy, even if that means going outside the rules. Doing acts of healing and compassion is the very essence of God's commandments: Love God with all your heart, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

As the Prophet Isaiah reminds us, our own healing, the strength of our own bones, our unbending and unbinding, will be found in helping satisfy the needs of other bent-over folks, in offering our food to the hungry, in satisfying the needs of the afflicted. Part of Sabbath is untying others so that their thirst can be quenched, too. If we want our own parched places to be watered, we will find that in providing for the thirst of others. That is how our life will become like a watered garden, supplied by a spring of water that will never fail.

As people who have experienced the liberating untying that Christ offers to us, we are called to be agents of providing Sabbath rest, Sabbath unbinding, Sabbath unbending, to all those who find themselves bent over. We are to be rebuilders, unbenders of our society. As people who have known Sabbath freedom, we're called to implement Sabbath unbending to our society. Christ calls us to be untyers of bound people. So, sisters and brothers, straighten your backs. Look around you once more. Then set out to unbend all those things that are bent over. It is our duty. It is where we will find our joy. Thanks be to God. AMEN