



Part III—Finding Our Identity

LESSON SEVEN

The Woman Who Was Bent Over



SCRIPTURE

Luke 13:10–17

MAIN IDEA

As followers of Christ, we are to serve with a compassionate and healing spirit and be part of setting people free.

Opening Prayer

O Christ, thank you for the example you set, showing us that there is no contradiction between servanthood and leadership, because leadership is service. We pray for siblings of Christ in your church. May their faithfulness inspire us all to spread the good news of your love throughout the world. Amen.

SUMMARY

The woman who was bent over was in bondage to a foreign spirit. She could not hold up her body at all—and this had been going on for eighteen years. Notice in the passage that she did not ask for anything or seek Jesus out. Jesus saw her and called her over. He didn't tell her to repent or to live right. He said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (Luke 13:12). Woman, you are free! What is amazing is what happened next. She stood up straight and tall and began praising God. But the biblical story does not end there. This story is also about a religious leader who was so upset

that Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath, he could not even see the miracle that happened right in front of him. Jesus teaches us that true church leaders have a compassionate and healing spirit, and are called to be part of setting people free.

LESSON

One day when Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, he saw a woman come in. It was hard not to notice her, because she was bent over. The Greek word “anakuyai” (ἀνακύψαι) implies that she could not straighten herself up at all. Scripture describes her as being in bondage to a disabling spirit. For eighteen years this spirit deprived her of strength. Think about that. For almost two decades, she was looking at the ground and unable to stand up straight.

She is identified by what she does not have—the ability to stand up straight—and Jesus gave that to her. When Jesus saw her in the synagogue, 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.

I can imagine this woman describing her experience.

I sometimes feel invisible. I am so grateful that Jesus saw me and called me over. This condition has been very hard on me. Sometimes my legs hurt, and my back hurts. I have to lie down to get relief.

I think of myself as a strong woman, but my condition makes me weak. I have adapted and push through the pain, and I still go out. I am glad I went to the synagogue today. I am so glad I met Jesus.

My body is strong again. I am healed. Jesus has set me free. You do not know what it feels like to have eighteen years of suffering taken away in an instant. It makes me want to cry—tears of joy! I praise God

for all God has done for me. I do not know why Jesus called me over when I was in the synagogue to pray, but I am so glad he did. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” That is what he said. The debilitating spirit is gone. Thank you, Jesus.

Offering Praise to God

Do you notice in the passage what the woman does after she is healed? She begins praising God. This story is about action, Jesus heals the woman; and reaction, the woman starts praising God. The Greek word used in Luke 13:13 is ἐδόξαζεν (edoxazen) and it means to praise or to glorify. A definition of glorifying in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is “to light up brilliantly.”³⁰ I love the idea of this woman being healed and lighting up brilliantly. Can you see it?

Sometimes, Presbyterians are stoic, and we do not always show our feelings. We may appear to some to be formal in nature, and we believe in doing things decently and in order. Seems to me that we can learn from the woman in this passage. Can you see us all lighting up brilliantly? I want to be in the room when that happens, when together we all glorify God and enjoy God forever.

When we are set free from debilitating circumstances, it is very difficult not to praise God. It is nearly impossible not to feel God’s love and share our gratitude, awe, and joy in God’s goodness.

Barbara Reid and Shelly Matthews suggest, “Although the NRSV translates ἐδόξαζεν as ‘began praising God,’ the imperfect tense verb could also indicate ongoing action begun in the past: ‘she kept on praising God.’ Whether bent or straight, she continually praises God.”³¹ Knowing who we are and whose we are helps us to know how to respond—by glorifying God.

30 “Glorify.” *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glorify. Accessed 27 Sep. 2024.

31 Reid and Matthews, *Luke 10* 24, 410.

A Daughter of the Covenant

Also, notice that Jesus was in the synagogue when he saw the woman who was bent over. Elizabeth Dowling writes, “In Luke 13:10–17, Jesus is once again in a synagogue on the Sabbath (13:10; cf. 4:16, 31–33; 6:6). This time, however, a woman is also explicitly mentioned as being present, highlighting the fact that women also participated in synagogal practice.”³²

While in the synagogue, Jesus notices, once again, the value and worth of a woman, who may have been there to pray, donate, or worship, just as he did when he pointed out to his disciples the woman who was poor who contributed to the treasury. This time, he calls over the woman who was bent over and heals her. We are reminded that women are beloved daughters and siblings in the community of Christ. This reinforces that the Holy Spirit calls people of different genders to all ministries in the church (see “A Brief Statement of Faith” in *The Book of Confessions*).³³

In the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Robert Karris states, “The Jewish religious heritage is not restricted to the healthy or to males. This woman belongs to reconstituted Israel.”³⁴ Note that Jesus claims this woman. He calls her a daughter of Abraham. You will remember that God said to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. . . . and I will be their God” (Gen. 17:7–8).

Jesus gives this unnamed woman an identity. She is connected to Abraham, and she is linked to Christ. We are reminded that all of us are one in

Christ Jesus. “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). The unnamed woman is given an identity. She is a daughter of the covenant. She belongs to Christ, and she is one whom Christ has healed.

Leading with a Compassionate Spirit

This daughter of the covenant is lifted up as an example, as compared to the leader of the synagogue, who was so worried that Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath that he could not even see the miracle that happened right in front of him. The woman runs into Jesus, but unfortunately, she also runs into the leader of the synagogue.

His argument borders on being ridiculous. Indignant that Jesus cured the woman on the Sabbath, he basically says to the crowd, “Come and be cured during the work week, and not on the Sabbath.” Do you realize how absurd that sounds? His message is, “If she can just come back another day, you can cure her then, Jesus. If she can just stay sick a little longer, you can heal her later.”

The synagogue leader is more concerned for the laws of the Sabbath than he is for this woman’s healing. But Jesus teaches church folks a new way to interact as leaders. Jesus teaches that to be a true church leader is not to focus on being a rule maker and disciplinarian but to possess a compassionate and healing spirit. Good church leaders support Jesus in healing folks from disabling spirits, so that they can be restored. Karris suggests, “The sabbath’s purpose, as Jesus sees it, is fulfilled not by forbidding works of compassion, but by encouraging them.”³⁵ Jesus calls the synagogue leaders “hypocrites!” and

32 Elizabeth Dowling, “The Woman with a Spirit of Infirmity,” in *Wisdom Commentary*, Luke 10–24, eds. Barbara E. Reid and Shelly Matthews (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), 412.

33 *The Book of Confessions*, “A Brief Statement of Faith,” 11.1, lines 29–32.

34 Karris, “Luke,” p. 705.

35 Karris, “Luke,” p. 705.

puts them to shame. Then, the people rejoice at the glorious things being done by Jesus.³⁶

The good news in this story is that Jesus sees and heals. Even though she did not ask for anything, Jesus healed her. The woman begins praising God or continues praising God for all of God's blessings to her.

Finding Our Identity in Jesus Christ

When we are younger our identity is tied up in whom others say we are. Our teachers, people in our neighborhood, and especially our families of origin and extended family, including our church family, all help us to piece together our identity.

When we become young adults and leave home, we may create a new identity related to who our friends are, our new environments, our college, our job, our interests, our hobbies or creative ventures.

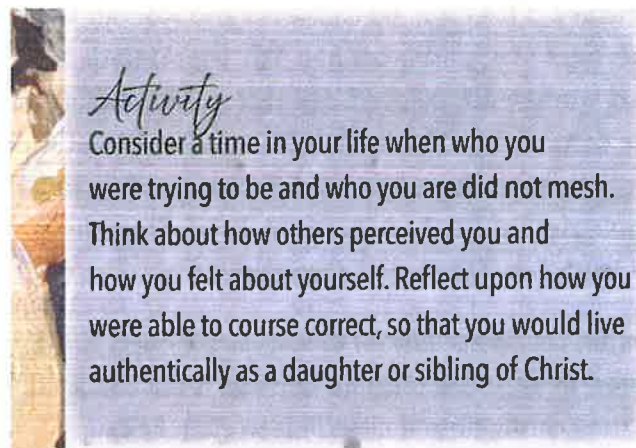
When we date others, have committed partners, get married, have or adopt children, care for others' children as our own, connect with people who are like family to us, and get promotions at work, this also affects the way we see ourselves and the ways that others see us.

For many of us the possessions we own are part of shaping our identity—cars, motorcycles, houses, boats, clothes, vacation homes—these are all part of our identity-building. Our identity, though, is not only who we are but also our place in the world, where we are heading, where we have been, where we belong, and whose we are.

We can get lost in our possessions or our social groups and forget who and whose we are. As Christians, we believe that we belong to God,

and that our identity is found in Jesus Christ. Our identity in Christ is part of every element of our lives. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, though sometimes we try to separate ourselves. We cannot separate ourselves from our Christian identity, even though, at times, when we are with certain people, we may ignore its existence.

The way to rediscover our identity in Christ is to reconnect and grow in union with God. God created us, and we seek to be in synthesis with God's creation and with the spirit of God that dwells in us, that we might be Christlike in the world.



Jesus Wants to Restore Us

I would like to believe that Jesus wants to restore us, just like he did the woman in the synagogue, and that he wants us to embrace our identity in Christ. As with many healing stories in the Bible, those who are healed begin to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ.

We do not know if all the people whom Jesus healed became his followers. And, we do not know that they did not. What we do know is

36 New Testament texts like this one have been misused throughout history to support anti-Jewish ideas and actions. In her article, "Is the New Testament Anti-Jewish?," biblical scholar Amy-Jill Levine offers a way forward: "While scholars debate whether the New Testament is anti-Jewish, we agree that it has been interpreted in ways that promote hatred of Jews and Judaism. Most Christians do not consciously read their texts as promoting hatred of Jews; most see Christianity as about love, not hate." (See *Bible Odyssey*, Society of Biblical Literature, n.d. bibleodyssey.org/articles/is-the-new-testament-anti-jewish.)

that Jesus blessed and healed anyway, and that people's lives were transformed because of Jesus' healing ministry.

Thus, their identity and living their lives anew is tied to Christ whether their faith made them well or not. Their lives were forever changed, just as ours were, in meeting and experiencing the power and glory of Jesus Christ.

Curiously, Jesus would often tell those whom he healed not to tell anyone, but they could not help themselves because they had been blessed beyond measure, beyond what they believed they deserved.

Some who go through hardships, through no fault of their own, are made to believe that they did something wrong or that they are being punished by God. Even if we intellectually know this is not so, we sometimes blame ourselves for our conditions. Women have historically been made to feel that they are sinful creatures and that they deserve God's wrath. But, God's new covenant makes us heirs with Christ, children of the promise. Jesus ushers in grace and redemption. This is seen in his healing ministry and in his acts of justice and love.

I would like to believe that in the woman's healing she came back to herself. In other words, she rediscovered her identity, which was not at all found in her medical condition, even if it encompassed a large part of her life. I would like to believe that she was physically and spiritually renewed.

The story of the woman who was bent over is the story of many women. Some of us are bent over due to physical conditions and some are, figuratively, bent over by life experiences. For some of us, it is like we are walking with our faces to the ground. We cannot see the road ahead of us or envision what our future may hold. All we see is dirt and rocks.

Jesus' word to us today is an invitation to celebrate. You who are bent over by heavy loads, weariness, disenchantment, grief, illnesses, or injuries that will not heal, this is an invitation for you. You who are convinced that your hopes in life are limited to what you can see with your ground-facing eyes, a time of rejoicing is coming.

Jesus gives good news to the woman who was bent over, and it is good news for ALL women, for Jesus has come to set us free. God lifts us up and reminds us that we are God's children.

A Challenge for Church Leaders

While there is good news for us as women in this passage, there is a challenge for us as church leaders. We are challenged to notice the miracles, to show compassion, and to join the crowd in rejoicing at the glorious things being done by Jesus.

When I was a pastor in Flint, Michigan, I met a family who had four generations living in their small house. Even though it may have been uncomfortable for her, when the teenage daughter—I will call her Pam—had her baby, she came to me and asked if I would baptize her and him. And yes, one Sunday at church, I baptized both Pam and John, Jr., and the congregation pledged to teach and support them.

Even though it was awkward, Pam and her family invited me over to their house, and I went. I sat on their small couch and was blown away that the baby, the nineteen-year-old mother, her mother and father, and the grandmother not only lived in this house—with the baby's father—but that these four generations sat with me when I came to visit.

Sometimes, the family, along with members of the church, were blessed to share worship, conversation, food, or help each other out and share our faith in Christ. But honestly, most of us never spent enough time to understand how

incredibly difficult their lives were, nor did we realize that in our society it is extremely hard to live full and healthy lives with limited income and educational opportunities, in a multiracial family, in a neighborhood and city that was declining.

I wish I could say that Pam and her family participated in worship each Sunday, grew in their Christian identity, and that the members of the church rediscovered theirs. But with Pam's family, our relationship had boundaries. It was often mutually beneficial, but the relationship had limits.

There may always be a family who are very different and feel they will not fit in but who courageously come to the church anyway, seeking to find God and God's people. And there may always be a woman who is bent over, who goes to the synagogue not seeking anything, but finds Christ's restorative healing.

Maybe what we learn is that we have to keep trying to listen more, learn more, walk with others more closely and build stronger relationships of mutual support, knowing that together, we are the family of God. We learn in this passage that we are to know our core identity

as followers of Christ and live out our calling by serving God's people. Jesus also teaches us in this passage that good church leaders have a compassionate and healing spirit, and that they are to be part of setting people free.



Activity

Find a journal or use a tablet, computer, or the note section on your phone to write about your relationship with Christ, your prayer life, and your spiritual life. After a time of prayer, reflect upon any new directions that you discern Christ may be leading you at this time in your life.

Closing Prayer

God of grace, forgive us for not fully living into the people that we know we can be. Thank you for developing us into the people that we are. Help us "to light up brilliantly" as we sing your praises. Guide us, O God, to have a compassionate and healing spirit, as we participate in your reign in the world. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. Christians believe that their core identity is found in Jesus Christ. What does this mean to you?
2. Is it significant that the woman who was bent over did not ask Jesus for healing and instead Jesus called her over and healed her? Why or why not?
3. Is it surprising to you to discover that women participated in synagogal practice? Why or why not?
4. The synagogue leader seemed obsessed with Jesus breaking the Sabbath, rather than the miraculous act of healing that occurred. When are we like the synagogue leader in our churches?
5. Jesus' acts of healing give testimony to God's salvation power and restore the healed person to participate fully in the community. We do not know why some are healed and others still live with disabling conditions. What do you think?
6. Why do you suppose the woman began praising God immediately after she was healed?
7. Did you notice at the end of the passage that the people rejoiced at the glorious things being done by Jesus? Why do you suppose the people rejoiced?

LESSON SEVEN NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has some minor discoloration and small dark spots, suggesting it might be old or handled. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

*Suggestions for Leaders***LESSON SEVEN: The Woman Who Was Bent Over****Central Concept**

This lesson begins a set of three with the underlying theme of finding our identity in Jesus. The woman who was bent over is a "daughter of Abraham," worthy to be set free from her bondage, and Jesus makes it so. We are disciples of the living Christ, worthy to be called children of God because Jesus has set us free from our bondage to sin and death. In that freedom, we remember who and whose we are, change our hearts and lives in accordance with the good news of the gospel and participate in God's kingdom work.

Connect

(10 minutes) This lesson invites us to celebrate our identity in Jesus, the Christ, who heals a woman who has been afflicted for eighteen years. The lesson offers us the image of the woman's response of praising or glorifying God as "lighting up brilliantly!" Invite the group to embrace that image by choosing an activity below.

- Finish this statement: "I praise God for . . ."
- Or this statement: "Jesus you are my . . ."
- Play some music and have a "Praise Jesus" dance party! (The woman "immediately stood up straight and began praising God." I can't imagine she was standing still!)
- Stand up and pray aloud your testimony, as led by the Spirit: "Thank you, Jesus, for . . ." name something you are thankful for. All reply after each testimony, "Praise God!"

Consider

(10 minutes) Invite participants to gather in small groups and read Luke 13:10–17, without comment; then write down one or two things that struck you, or you have a question about. In the whole group, explain you are simply noting observations and questions to invite wondering about the story—comments and explanations will unfold. Ask participants to name in a phrase or sentence what struck them and make notes all can see. Do the same for their questions.

(30–40 minutes) Use your choice of these questions and activities to explore this story, considering your own context, the size of your group, and aspects of the story you believe might spark reflection that leads to new insights and action. Note especially that numbers 4, 6, 7, and 8 increase the opportunity for more participation and for personalizing learning. I encourage using 9 in summary as it highlights today's theme—identity in Jesus.

1. This story describes the source of this woman's affliction in two ways: "a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years" (v. 11), and "whom Satan bound for eighteen long years" (v. 16). Do the narrator's and Jesus' description mean the same thing? How might we compare these two descriptions?
2. You may recall Mary Magdalene from Lesson One, "from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2b), where the number emphasizes the severity of her afflictions. Similarly, as we observe this woman, it is helpful to remember that "Evil spirits and infirmities were afflictions to be healed, not sins to be forgiven.* What do Jesus' words in verses 12 and 16 tell us about how Jesus understands the purpose of this healing?
3. The purpose, "freedom from bondage" carries a huge weight. It may make sense to think of this woman's healing as more than physical; also, as mental, and spiritual. Ask, How might that be so? Invite participants to gather in small groups and discuss these two questions: From what bondage does physical healing free us? Mental healing? Spiritual healing? Have you experienced any of these kinds of healing, and how has that affected you? (Protect this personal sharing with no reporting back to the group.)
4. The response of the woman who was bent over is to stand up straight and begin praising God. What evidence do you see in this story that this woman already worships God? How do

you imagine it feels to be cured of a long and debilitating illness? What do you think one might be tempted to focus more on—how much one has lost in that time, or how much lies ahead? Why? What difference might that choice make for one's response to this great gift?

5. This lesson points to compassion over a strict interpretation of the law as an essential act of leadership for today's church. When Jesus denounces synagogue leadership in his day, one might imagine equivalent leaders today are the laity—ruling elders, deacons, those who teach, those who lead Bible studies, those who serve in a multitude of discipleship roles. In pairs, identify where you see the need for compassion most in your own context? In your own Christian practice?
6. Ask the group participants, how do you see Jesus' healing in this story as bringing and building the kingdom of God? What do you believe your congregation is doing to build the kingdom of God on earth? How might you participate in kingdom work? Acknowledge both big and small ways disciples have influence today.
7. What might be the results if your congregation examined how closely its identity in Jesus reflects Jesus' priority in this story? In silence, reflect on how that examination would turn out for you in your life of faith and discipleship?

each other, or on a cross placed on a table in the center of the circle; each one with a lit candle; a central campfire of bright yellow, orange, and red crepe paper flames—let your imagination run!

Pray the lesson's Closing Prayer and sing an appropriate closing song, such as "This Little Light of Mine."^{**}

This little light of mine, I'm gonna' let it shine (3x)

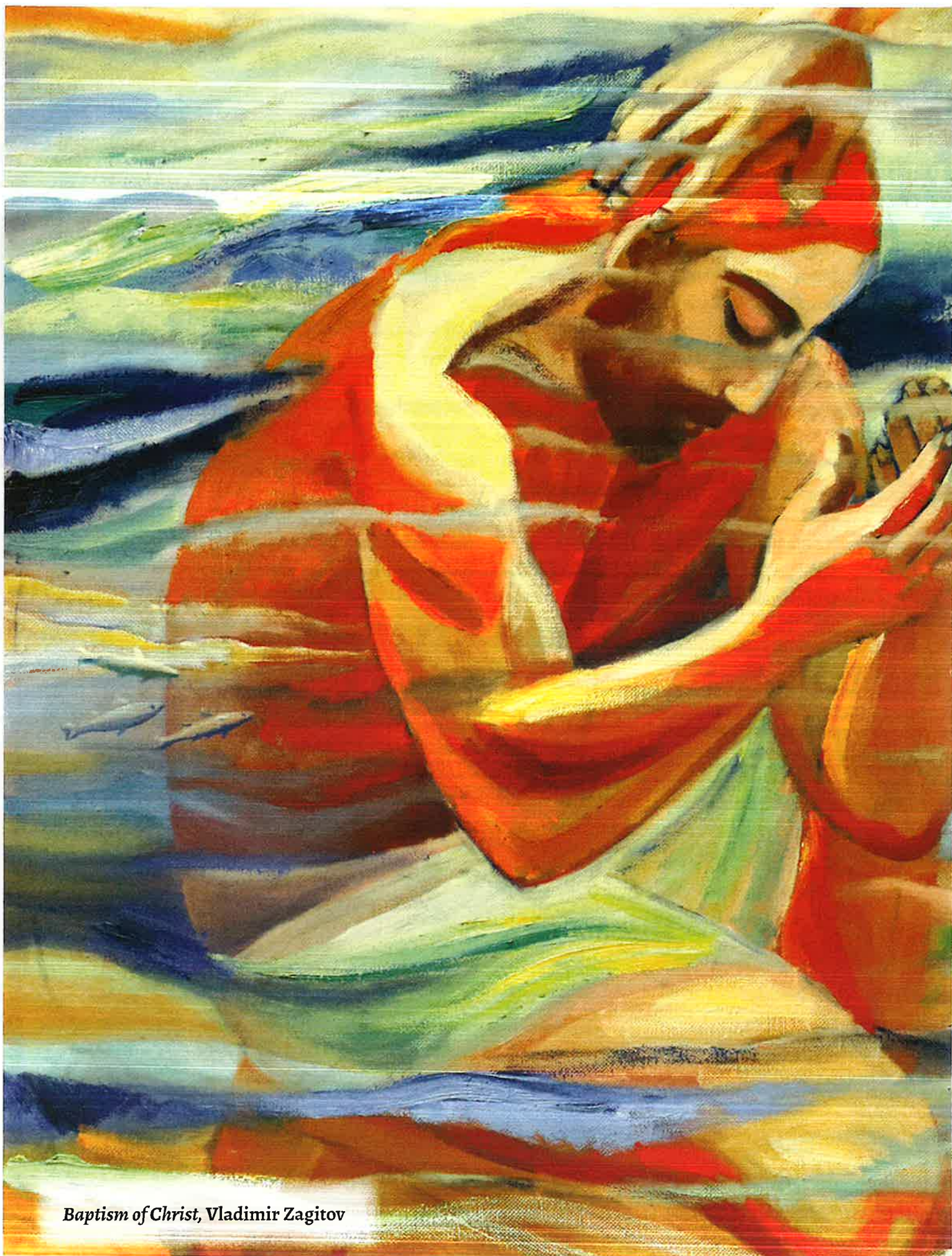
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine!"

*Society of Biblical Literature, "Luke 8:2-3 footnote," in *HarperCollins Study Bible: Fully Revised and Updated*. HarperOne; Revised and Updated ed (August 22, 2006).

** "This Little Light of Mine," African American spiritual, public domain. Lyrics by Harry Dixon Loes. Tune by Horace Clarence Boyer.

Commune and Commit

(10 minutes) In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is all about calling people to change their hearts and lives, and this story is a case in point. One might even think of glorifying God by shining a light on its witness as "lighting up brilliantly." In preparation for closing this lesson, arrange a way to symbolize praising God for changed hearts and lives. Plan to gather in a circle. For example, consider all phone flashlights on shining on



Baptism of Christ, Vladimir Zagitov