

August 23: Set Free (Luke 13:10-17) – Pastor Heather preaching

Welcome to our summer series of *Visio Divina* – where we take a break from more traditional sermons to explore a creative way of engaging with God and growing in our faith. *Visio Divina* is a spiritual practice similar to *Lectio Divina*, where a passage of Scripture is read multiple times and listeners are invited to listen for how God might be speaking to them through a particular word or phrase or image. *Visio Divina* also invites us into listening and meditation, but is focused on a piece of artwork based on its creator's experience with God and God's word.

This morning, I'll give a brief meditation on our gospel story, and then I'll introduce the painting that depicts it. I'll offer some instructions and potential questions to consider before inviting us to begin our practice – but you are welcome to engage in any way that makes sense for you.

Before we begin, please take a moment to center yourself and pray with me:

God of compassion, you bent down all the way from heaven to earth in order to be with us and enter fully into the joy and the suffering of our human lives. As we retell the story of how you entered a synagogue on the Sabbath and brought healing and liberation to one of your beloved children, may we become aware of your presence here with us today, in this community, and may we hear and receive your words of love and healing and freedom for ourselves. Amen.

Usually when I preach, I hope for eye contact from my listeners – it's an important sign of life! – but this morning, I'm going to ask you all to bend over and look down at your own feet, and stay like that until I release you. What do you see down there, and what do you not see? Now imagine getting trapped in that bent-over posture, completely unable to straighten up again – not just for a few minutes or hours or days, but for weeks that stretch into months that stretch into years. Imagine conversations going on around and above you, and getting overlooked a lot. Imagine trying to assert your rights and dignity and project your voice when you can't stand up and look somebody in the eyes. Imagine that this has been your reality for the past 18 years. You've almost forgotten what it feels like to tilt your head up and feel the full sun on your face, and perhaps you've given up hope that life will ever be different.

In today's gospel reading, Luke introduces us to "a woman who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all" (Luke 4:11). Notice how Luke describes her infirmity three different ways, with excruciating detail – he's drawing our attention to the intensity of what she has suffered. In Jewish and Greco-Roman culture, a condition like this would diminish a woman in every way. She might be seen as somehow at fault for her suffering, or as a threat to the spiritual purity of her community. I imagine that this woman's body was bent towards the ground not only because of her original condition, but also from the weight of 18 years of accumulated scorn and shame. She existed at the utter margins of a community that did not fully see or embrace her.

The NIV translation we read from says that this woman was crippled by a spirit, but the Greek word translated "crippled" doesn't always refer to a physical condition – it can also mean a state of weakness, frailty, or lacking power and capability. She was not free to fully live and flourish, and in verse 16, Jesus clarifies that this was not her own fault, but the result of evil and oppression: Satan had kept her bound for 18 years. She was bent under the power of destructive forces and systems opposed to God's purposes of life and freedom. When I picture being bent by oppression, I immediately think of the effect that abuse has on a person who is bowed under a power that seeks to crush their will and spirit. I think about those who are diminished and demonized because of their gender or race or sexuality or immigration status. I think of those held in bondage by addiction or unresolved trauma, both of which can cause physical hunching or stooping. As you continue to bend towards the ground, think about what might weigh someone down so heavily that they can't straighten up to their full height. Have you ever felt this way?

For almost two decades, this woman was bound and bent and excluded in every way – and yet, somehow, she wasn't completely crushed. She continued to show up at the synagogue to observe the Sabbath and to claim her place as a member of God's people, even as those people pushed her to the margins.

On this Sabbath though, there was a new presence in the synagogue, an itinerant preacher who claimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him and had sent him to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and to set the oppressed free. The bent-over woman wouldn't have been able to see his face, but he saw her, fully and completely, and he called her forward to the place where he was teaching – from the margins into the very center of the community. "Woman,"

he said to her as he bent over to look her directly in the eyes, “you are set free from your infirmity.” ***[If you’re still looking down, I invite you to straighten up and look at the painting on the screen.]*** Jesus laid his hands on the woman, and immediately, for the first time in 18 years, she straightened up to her full height and looked out over the amazed community that surrounded her. And then, like the Israelites after God brought them through the Red Sea and into freedom, she raised her voice in joy and confidence and praised God.

Back in Deuteronomy, when Moses recited the Ten Commandments, he said this about honoring the Sabbath: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). Can you think of any better way to celebrate the Sabbath day than to praise God for setting you free from 18 years of bondage? The synagogue officials, however, didn’t agree – in fact, they were indignant that Jesus did healing “work” on the Sabbath. Rather than confronting Jesus directly, the leader tried to shame him by talking directly to the congregation: “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

These leaders were blinded and stunted by their drive to preserve power and authority and tradition – like the Grinch, their hearts were two sizes too small. And in this story, they were about as effective in stealing the joy of Jesus’ miracle as the Grinch was in stealing Christmas. Jesus immediately confronted them with a scathing comeback: “You hypocrites! “Doesn’t each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?” (Luke 13:15-16)

By pointing out how these men cared more for their animals than for a suffering woman in their own community, Jesus exposed and called out the way they dehumanized her. He reminded them of the purpose of the Sabbath, and how they’d strayed from it. He shamed them. The most beautiful part of his retort, though, wasn’t the way he verbally destroyed his opponents, but the way he lifted up and honored the woman he healed. By calling her “Daughter of Abraham”, he identified her as a direct heir of the promise and blessing God gave to Abraham and Sarah, and he named her as a full-fledged member of the family of God, chosen and called to carry God’s light and love to the world.

“Daughter of Abraham” wasn’t a new identity for this woman – Jesus made it clear that this is who she’d always been. But by healing her, Jesus released her to fully reflect that identity to the world, to live into and live out her full worth and personhood. He ennobled and lifted up this humble woman in front of her entire community, even as he publicly humiliated its leaders – a great reversal. And the people loved it – Luke says they “were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing” (Luke 13:17).

The first time I really encountered this story was when I was struggling to fully embody my calling as a pastor and a preacher. I was weighed down under spoken and unspoken messages I had received for decades – about how my female voice shouldn’t be raised too loudly or confidently in the church, about how I was more acceptable to God and God’s people when I kept myself small and stooped. Then, in a small group with other female pastors, I was invited to practice *lectio divina* with this passage, letting it examine me and speak to me, and I heard Jesus telling me I was set free from what bound me – free to raise my head with confidence, free to lift my voice and expand into my full identity as a woman who is chosen and called and gifted and emboldened to proclaim the good news. It’s a freedom I have to receive and reclaim again and again and again, because those voices are still there. Like the song the praise band sang this morning, I need to be reminded of who Jesus says I am – daughter of God, daughter of promise, beloved and anointed and filled with God’s Spirit.

And now, I’m inviting *you* to encounter this story through the practice of *visio divina*, opening your hearts to hear what Jesus might be saying to you. Barbara Schwartz, the artist who created this painting of the bent-over woman and Jesus, is a Dominican nun, and the OP after her name means Order of Preachers. Like me, she is called and gifted to proclaim the good news of Jesus – but she does it primarily through artistic expression. She says that “the arts can teach where words fall silent,” and that she likes to think of her vocation as allowing God, the ultimate creator and artist, to draw and paint with her, “as the light of the Spirit’s presence” flows through her pencil and paint to produce a work that touches people in ways that words alone cannot.

In Sister Barbara’s painting, it’s not just the woman who’s bent over, it’s also Jesus – he is with her where she is, looking directly into her eyes. “Jesus would not look down on her,” Sister Barbara said. “They are meeting as human beings, person to person – and that was important because Jesus, God, cares about us as persons...he wants to connect with her as a person.”



As you gaze at this picture for the next few minutes, I pray that you will connect with the God who loves you tenderly and fiercely and longs for your flourishing. Before I start the timer, I'd like to give you a few guidelines.

First, look slowly and thoroughly at the painting, paying attention to the colors, movement, postures, and expressions you see, and let your imagination roam. What is the woman thinking and feeling? What does she see in Jesus' face and read in his eyes? What does Jesus see when he looks at her? What will happen next?

Second, when you are ready, bring yourself into the picture. Imagine that you are the woman. What is weighing you down or keeping you in bondage? What do you hope or long for? Look at Jesus looking at you. What does he see? What do *you* see in Jesus' eyes? What might he say to you? What might happen next? Have you ever had an experience of liberation or healing? Do you long for it?

Third, I invite you to respond with prayer. What would you like to say to Jesus, to God? What would you like to ask him for, or thank him for? Do you sense a new awareness, or invitation, or conviction? Offer that up to God.

And finally, simply rest in God's presence. Sit with the painting and the story and notice how God is with you in this space. You are so deeply loved.

Remember: Gaze & imagine, reflect, respond, & rest. May God meet you in the silence. You may begin.

Thank you, my friends. I hope this practice gave you a chance to enter the story of Jesus and the bent over woman in a new way. Like the woman, may you leave this sabbath space with an experience of Jesus' deep compassion and love as he looks at you, and may you be a little more free to live into your full identity as God's beloved child, chosen and called. Amen.