

August 22, 2010
Luke 13
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Praise for Healing

When I try to picture the woman Jesus encountered in the synagogue, several images come to my mind.

The first is an elderly woman from my hometown who had a medical condition that made her severely bent over. She was very active, warm and caring soul, who went all over town running errands and doing things for people. Usually she pulled a little cart behind her because it was difficult for her to carry anything, but it is not an exaggeration to say her nose was only slightly higher off the ground than her belly button. She was bent over by disease.

The second is from a trip to Cancun Mexico. We went there one year with Shelli's family and it happened to be right after a hurricane had devastated the area. We stayed at a very nice resort down the coast a ways but it was difficult to enjoy a relaxing vacation when so many people were still trying to recover from such a huge loss. I especially remember many women and men carrying huge bundles of grass on their backs as they made their way around the resort grounds trying to repair all of the thatched roofs that had blown away. They were bent over by work.

And finally I picture a Christmas Eve skit. The drama dealt with all the stress and burdens that distract us during the holiday season. One of the characters was a mother who kept trying to keep up with all the demands and expectations placed upon her. As shouts from her children, her husband, and her mother-in-law rose louder and louder, the woman became immobilized by the crushing weight of obligation and she slouched over, looked down, and became smaller and smaller. She was bent over by guilt and stress.

I think in some way, the woman Jesus encounters embodies all of these images.

The bible translation we read from this morning describes her as having a spirit that cripples her but literally she has a "spirit of weakness". She is in some way physically disabled, and yet she is also bent over and out of shape in many other ways. Everyone who had some kind of physical abnormality in the ancient world was viewed with suspicion. Disability was thought to be a sign of divine disfavor and the afflicted were often shackled with labels of "sinner" whether they deserved it or not.

Jesus recognizes this by proclaiming this woman to be "set free" from her weakness. Jesus provides more than a cure. Jesus provides [freedom](#) from all those things that work to defeat us and bend us down to the ground. In giving the woman the ability

to stand upright and praise God, Jesus restores her to a position of honor and value within the community. She is called a “daughter of Abraham” who can once again raise her head and hands to the heavens in the traditional stance of prayer and praise to God.

In many ways then, **healing means we have the ability to praise God.**

We long to have physical cures for the diseases and disabilities many of us endure and it is essential that we continue to ask God to provide healing for our bodies. God works both through the abilities of modern medicine and through the mysterious, miraculous power of prayer that defies explanation. Many of you sitting here today know this power in your own lives.

Yet not everyone receives a physical cure to our own particular “spirit of weakness” and we know that eventually every physical cure we do receive is only temporary. On top of that, even those with healthy bodies can still be bent over to the ground with the burdens and worries and stress of living in this world of pain and death. What does Jesus offer for this kind of weakness? What power can possibly overcome such senseless suffering?

The only answer is the power of the cross. [It is the suffering God who is able to help us in our own suffering.](#) Not to eliminate our ‘spirits of weakness’ but to FREE us from them **and to unlock our ability to praise God in all circumstances!** In naming Satan as the one who has tied this woman’s identity to her disability for 18 long years, Jesus makes this encounter about much more than having a healthy body. This is a demonstration of Jesus’ power over every dark force, every attitude and thought that sucks the life out of us and tells us we are not worthy to be called daughters and sons of a blessed family.

Satan in the Jewish name for the adversary of God, the accuser who points out human weakness and inability, but Satan is not the evil equivalent of God. [Satan in fact has no power at all in the presence of God](#) and Jesus is able to free this woman from the accuser’s grip with a simple touch of his hands. Jesus encounters this woman as he is journeying towards Jerusalem where his own suffering and death awaits. There, God’s own “self” will enter into the darkest places in human existence. Jesus, the man who is at one with God, brings the presence of God into death itself and by that act sets us all forever free from the power of death. There is now no place, not even the pit of hell, that has not been touched by the presence of God and [if God is present to stand us up straight, Satan has no power to keep us bent over.](#) Halleluiah! Let us praise God with hands and heads lifted high!

But our story is not quite complete. We still have this church leader to consider. Why is he upset over this joyful occasion? What has him all ‘bent out of shape’ when everyone else is giving thanks to God? It is probably easy to make this cranky pastor (or council president) the bad person in the story but he actually has a point. What

Jesus does his work after all, and the Sabbath day was a day when God had commanded that no work be done. There were many healers in Jesus' day, many of them took money in exchange for their services. It was the ancient health care system. The woman's life is not in danger and this church leader is upset that all of this commotion is detracting from the command to keep the Sabbath day holy.

But in his voice is a warning for our own temptation to believe that we can know how, and through whom, God chooses to act in the world. How often do we limit our view of what God can do? How often do we deny healing to people simply because they do not fit into our mold of the right time and place? How often do we actually contribute to the burdens of already bent over people by piling guilt and shame on them? How often does our own self-righteousness make us look like hypocrites?

Jesus reminds the synagogue leader that holy work keeps the Sabbath holy. Holy work is giving healing and wholeness to a woman who has been bent over for 18 years and calling her a beloved daughter in God's family. Holy work is having compassion on both people and animals. [Holy work is God not really taking a day off but continuing the act of creation](#) as lives are changed and transformed by the power of love, forgiveness, and healing of all kinds. What better day, than on the Sabbath day, to do holy work and give people healing. What better time than this time, to give people freedom from the accuser. What better place than this place to raise our heads and hands in praise to our amazing and loving God! Halleluiah! Amen.