

August 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007

13<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Luke 13:10-17

“Jesus Heals the Bent Over Woman”

I invite you to take a moment and think back to late August 1989, 18 years ago. Where are you? What are you doing? How's life? What kind of person are you? What successes and joys are part of your life? What struggles, burdens, demons, are you battling?

Think of the 18 years between 1989 and right now. How are things different? How are things the same? Do you still have familiar burdens, struggles, battles happening now that you did 18 years ago? Burdens that you have carried around for these last 18 years?

18 years is a long time to carry a burden, battle a demon, struggle with a physical or psychological ailment.

Today Scripture brings the story of a woman who has been bent over for 18 years into our world. She has no name. She is the bent over woman. She's been bent over for so long nobody can remember a pre bent over time for her. She probably finds it hard to remember her life before she became bent over. Perhaps by now her bent over ness is just accepted as part of who she is. That's her lot in life, there's nothing she can do about it. The struggles, the separation from others, the loneliness, the stares, the comments, that's just the way it is.

Oh, I know about bent. Not visibly! I stand 6 foot 2 inches. Nothing bent about that. I can see over the crowds. No walking around looking at the ground for me. Nothing physically obvious. The bentness I speak of is beneath the surface usually, well hidden. A bentness in my thinking, feeling, living, a bentness that is a mix of upbringing, mistakes, poor choices, family history, personality traits, damage. The bentness that comes from inner voices full of “shoulds”, “musts”, “can't”, the shame/blame game that sometimes rules me.

Bent, bound, for 18 years.. “Compared with the bent over woman my bent and broken nature is not visible to any but the most trained eyes, perhaps visible only to the eyes of God and the people I share my life with.

C.S. Lewis speaks of sin as being bent, “misshapen, not the way we were made to be, and not fit for our intended purpose. We are all of us, bent, some like the woman in our gospel for today, literally bent over, the rest of us, simply out of shape, not as God intended.” Yea, I'm bent!

So there is this woman who has been bent over for 18 years and she comes near the synagogue where Jesus is teaching/preaching on this particular Sabbath day. And in the midst of his waxing eloquent he notices this woman and all of a sudden the plans for the Sabbath day service changes. Jesus does something that's not in the Order of Service! He sees a woman who is bent over and he heals her, and it happens to be on the Sabbath.

The woman who has been bent over for 18 long years has been healed. She is standing upright, it is a miracle. Praise to God and praise to Jesus the healer. Glory to God! You would think the gathering would break into singing the Doxology!

But at least one person is not amused. The leader of the synagogue reminds everyone that it is the Sabbath day, there are six days to work, to do good, but on the seventh day our God calls us to rest, to worship, to do no work. The Sabbath day has been broken. This is the time to worship God not perform healings. Once again Jesus does not seem to be with the program. Why does Jesus always seem to be breaking the rules, or at least stretching them?

I can relate to the leader of the synagogue, who desires order, propriety, the proper keeping of the Sabbath. Let's not get distracted, taken off course by every bent over woman who comes along, we could end up with non-stop healings! Stay the course, keep the focus, honour the Sabbath.

"Hey, you folks should know better than to come to get healed on the Sabbath! We are here to worship God! We can't have all this healing and interruptions, and praising God. We are getting off the script."

The other Sunday night a small group of us were worshipping in the chancel area. It was a muggy night and the front doors of the sanctuary were open. I was just nicely started my sermon when we heard the loud voice of a woman outside. She was obviously very distraught and full of angry words. We tried to ignore it, as I went on preaching my nice sermon. But she wouldn't stop, she got louder. A couple of the people in our worship gathering went out, later I found out they tried to talk with her, listen to her, pray with her, none of which she wanted. She was screaming that "you've taken away my church".....

In the midst of this I wasn't sure what to do and then someone spoke up from our gathering and said, "let's pray for her". And I stopped my sermon and we offered prayers for this troubled woman and prayers for all of us who are troubled, burdened, bound, bent over.

A preacher shared the following personal story on line:

“I was waiting my turn to see the emergency room doctor when a young mother came through the doors with her child, maybe 3 or 4 years old. The little girl was crying and the woman who, I took to be the child’s mother, was holding a bloody handkerchief over the little girl’s mouth. She looked around frantically for someone to help and rushed to the desk and said: “my daughter’s been hurt and I need to see” . . . . .she was cut off in mid-sentence – “you need to take a seat and wait for one of the clerks to sign you in.”

“But my little girl was hit in the mouth by” . . . .She was interrupted again, “Please take a seat ma’am, someone will be with you shortly.” Just then the ER doctor walked in and said to the woman at the desk, “Shame on you, this girl needs help right now!” He motioned to the woman and the little girl and led them to an examining room.

Briefly, and guiltily, I wondered when my turn to see the doctor might come, but if I live to be a hundred years old, I wonder if I will ever see another time when a person’s pain so clearly wins out over the system’s protocol. “Shame on you!” The physician was looking at a child’s pain. The clerk was looking at the hospital’s procedure.”

I have my own doctor’s office story. Sitting in the waiting room the other week a woman came in with her two elderly parents. She checked in with the receptionist. It was apparent that all three of them knew very little English. The receptionist, just doing her job, informed the woman that she would have to complete a number of forms for her parents before they could see the doctor. She tried to explain to the receptionist in her broken English that she could not read the forms but the receptionist asked her to sit down and have her parents at least sign them. The woman said her mother did not have a signature but she sat down with the forms. I was watching this, one voice said to stay out of it, but another voice nudged me to offer to help them. I went over beside them and gave them some help with the forms. They were very appreciative and I felt that I had done the right thing.

Jesus heals the bent over woman because she is in need. He is about the work of his Father. When we risk being about the Master’s work our lives take on greater purpose and meaning, we find the Way, the Truth, the Life. In responding to others who are bent over we find that our own bentness is loosed and we experience freedom in Christ, we discover the life abundant.

The same is true for us as a community of faith. Responding to the needs around us, seeking to bring healing to those who are bent over and bound, we discover our mission, our purpose, as the people of God, we enter into the Kingdom work that God calls us to and that God desires to do in and through us.

So here are the numbers in today's sermon.

The first number is 18. Eighteen long years bent over and today, healed. Praise be to God!

The next number is 7. The 7<sup>th</sup> day, the Sabbath, "a weekly reminder of the Lord's rest at the end of creation. A joyful day of worship and strict observance of rest from work.

The 7<sup>th</sup> day, the Sabbath, God's gift to God's people. However the 7<sup>th</sup> day does not take precedence over the 18 years.

And perhaps the greatest number is the 7 year sabbatical when the earth gets a rest and lies dormant times 7 years. The 50<sup>th</sup> year the year of Jubilee when time is turned back, when it is time for God's shalom to reign, when slaves are set free, debts are forgiven, there is rest for the soil.

As Philo says: "The number 50 was the most holiest and the most substantial of all numbers because it indicated liberation and total freedom, the return to the pristine state". "You shall hallow the 50<sup>th</sup> year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants."

Greater than the 7<sup>th</sup> day, the Sabbath, greater than the 50<sup>th</sup> year, the year of Jubilee, is the coming Reign of God, Kingdom of God. For God reigns when the bent are made straight, the rough are made smooth, the valleys are lifted up, the lion lies down with the lamb, and there is no more mourning nor crying, for the former things have passed away.

This is Jesus' work. There is our common work.

Amen. Thanks be to God!