The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

August 25, 2019

 “*Stand Up Straight*”

Psalm 71:1-6 ~ Hebrews 12:18-29 ~ Luke 13:10-17

Consider this poor woman in today’s gospel. For eighteen years she had been plagued by a bad back. Perhaps the woman had a form of scoliosis. Perhaps it was some type of spinal ossification or fusion. Perhaps she had suffered an injury. I wonder if she was just plain worn out from a hard life of manual labor. Making a medical diagnosis 2,000 years after the fact is futile, and Luke doesn’t tell us what ailment caused her to walk stooped over … drawn up in constant pain. He says she had "a spirit that had crippled her," which was the answer people always gave in those days when someone had a problem that no one could understand.

Perhaps Luke is telling us that something was crippled *about* this woman's spirit. The way people react differently to suffering is always a mystery to me. Did she bear her pain silently … with a gentle appreciation of those around her and an exceptional compassion for others who suffered, too? Or was she angry and bitter … always complaining … making life for the people around her as miserable as she felt? We could hardly blame her for exteriorizing her pain that way … unless of course, it was her inner bitterness which led to her condition in the first place. I so often see hurt between people come from the pain they're carrying in their hearts over something else which is never even named. And I see bitterness affect people's health in adverse ways … not to mention their relationships. Life has a way of crippling our spirits … making us smaller and meaner … burdened and stooped over … carrying all our wounds and grudges and injustices like so much toxic waste in our souls … always the victim … always angry … always on the outside looking in.

Jesus came to the synagogue, as was his custom. He *saw* this woman, called her over, and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Which "ailment?" … her crippled back or her crippled spirit? Both, it turns out. He placed his hands upon her and immediately, Luke says, "immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God." That’s the best cure for a crippled spirit I know. When we are feeling angry, bitter, hurt, misunderstood, cut off from our friends, and miserable with ourselves, we need to stand up straight and begin praising God … remembering that we are children of God … one of Christ's beloved. No one can ever take that from us. We need to remember all the good that God has poured into our lives … the gift of life itself … all of the gifts which we did nothing to earn and do not deserve … gifts that come from God's grace, pure and simple. We need to remember the power and love of God who can overcome all obstacles and who promises to bring all things together for the good. We need to stand up straight and begin praising God, and in time our hurts will seem very small indeed.

I'm glad this woman didn't retreat into isolation to sip her rage. I'm glad she kept coming to the synagogue … kept turning to God for relief … and healing for her spirit. It took eighteen years, but she didn't give up on God. In fact, I'm guessing that worship in that congregation is what helped her to bear her infirmity for eighteen years without giving up. And I appreciate the people in her congregation, too. It must have been hard for them to see her in this condition … and hard for them to live with a pain in their midst that they could do nothing about. We can see their love by the way they responded when Jesus healed her. They knew her … she was one of their own. They saw this woman who had been bent over for eighteen years stand up straight and begin praising God. At first, they watched in slack-jawed amazement, and then *they* stood up straight and began praising God. The entire crowd was rejoicing … except for one. The ruler of the synagogue objected.

The law said you weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was God's day. It was a day of rest. It was a day of worship. And here was this Jesus … stirring up the crowd … distracting them from worship … and teaching strange notions about a God who forgives and loves sinners. And then he healed this crippled woman. Simply put, Jesus broke God's law.

The leader of the synagogue was furious. This was his turf. These people were his responsibility. And he hated to see them duped by some religious charlatan into disobeying the clear commands of scripture. So, he spoke up in a classic case of misplaced anger. He vented his anger on the crowd instead of addressing it to Jesus. How many times have we seen that? Someone is angry with his father for emotional abandonment, but takes it out on his son … or a wife is enraged at an alcoholic husband but takes it out on her friends … or someone is mad at God but takes it out on the church?

So, everybody was rejoicing with the woman … but the ruler of the synagogue was barking orders and grousing about the law. What was with this guy? How could anybody be so out of touch with reality? Couldn't he see that this woman had been healed? Maybe he was angry because he couldn't help this woman and now Jesus had. Maybe he was afraid of losing face before his congregation because he had warned them about Jesus and now, well look at what he'd done for them. Maybe he was so accustomed to reining people in to obey the law that he couldn't stand a liberation which came from beyond the law. Whatever the reason, he couldn’t see it. His sense of propriety blinded him to it.

I can understand how he felt. The law does matter … there is such a thing as right and wrong, responsibility and accountability, and moral absolutes. The Ten Commandments, the beatitudes, the disciplines of discipleship … these rules are important. We break them at our own peril. We should teach them to our children and do our best to follow them because they are the best way to live a healthy life in good relationship with one another. And sin is never just a private matter … because sin damages people and infects the wider community. When we fail to do what is right, we are less and that makes our world less … not to mention the direct damage we do to those under our influence. We need laws, rules, moral standards, or we have no values. We have no community.

The problem comes in our agreeing about what the rules are. The problem comes in our tendency to make minor rules into absolute laws, for as Robert Musil remarked, "There is no truth that stupidity can't make use of." The problem comes in the way we use our standards to destroy people rather than lifting them. The problem comes in our living by the rules rather than by the love which inspired them. The problem comes in our attempts to punish rather than rescue the people who have failed … which are every one of us at one time or another. The problem comes in forgetting that our God is forgiving, healing, restoring, and gracious. The problem comes in our own self-righteousness, which cripples our spirit as quickly as any rage.

But before we criticize and pass judgment, we need to remember how much we ourselves have been forgiven. We need to consider the inner hurt that leads another person to commit crimes against our spirit. For instance, I am so tempted to judge this man in Luke's story whose head was so locked up in the letter of the law that his heart had lost all capacity for compassion … a man who was so bent over by the rules that he could not stand up and praise God when a woman of his own congregation was set free from an eighteen year burden … a man whose spirit was so crippled that he could not rejoice in her healing because it happened in a way contrary to his expectations. But my judging him won’t make anything better … people like this need our understanding and our pity and our prayers. How sad it is when the people of God define God so rigidly that they cannot recognize the love of God in the liberation of a crippled soul. But we see this a lot don’t we … people preaching hate and rejection … passing harsh judgment in the name of Christ … and then citing a scripture text to validate their point.

We meet Norma in S. R. Bindler's real life documentary, *Hands on a Hard Body*. It’s about a group of 24 people in Longview, Texas, who compete in a contest to win a new hard body Nissan truck by keeping their hands on it the longest. Norma is conspicuously religious. A friend tells us that over two hundred people are praying for her in prayer chains in her own church and another church in San Antonio. Norma is the last person that you expect to be standing at the end. She is short, overweight, not at all the athlete. She is convinced that she is destined to be in this contest. *"My husband and I have been praying for a truck and we just think this is what God wants us to do."* We see scenes of her clapping and ecstatically singing "The Joy of the Lord is My Strength" at a worship service in her Pentecostal church before the contest. She listens to Christian music tapes through the first fifty hours of the contest … laughing frequently with the joy of the Lord … but keeping one hand firmly on the truck as the rules require. The other contestants laugh at her. Then they laugh with her. And we all come to love her.

Amazingly, Norma hangs on … several younger men and women drop out … a former Marine …even the winner from two years before who has warned us, *"It's a human drama thang... You have to have the mettle.... If you can't hunt with the big dogs, get up on the porch with the pups.... It's a test of stamina of who can maintain their sanity the longest."* After 74 hours with no sleep, Norma is still standing. She has an inner strength which her appearance belies, and the others come to respect. All the rest have dropped out save one other contestant, J. D.. But after 76 grueling hours Norma loses the truck when she suddenly starts singing and dancing and clapping her hands. J. D., the winner, observes sadly, *"She was praising the Lord and got happy and the truck didn't matter anymore."*

Some things are more important than a truck, even in Texas. Some things are more important than unforgiven anger from the past. Let it go. It will cripple your spirit. Some things are more important than making sure everybody else follows your definition of the rules … which is an arrogant and hopeless burden to carry anyway. It will cripple your spirit. So, lighten up. Jesus has come to this synagogue today to tell you "You are set free!" and he can do it for you. Beloved, the human drama is a test of stamina of who can maintain their sanity the longest. And the only way to win is to stand up straight and start praising God. May we pray?

Heal us, Lord, from the burdens of our sins. Free us from the burden of anger we carry because of those who have hurt us. Free us from the burden of guilt we carry because we have hurt them. Free us from the burden of trying to make everybody else righteous by our rules. And teach us to love in Jesus' name. Amen.