



THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

AUGUST 25, 2019

LUKE 13: 10-17

“STAND TALL”

On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, “Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.” Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, “There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.”

The Lord answered him, “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?”

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

- Mary received a parrot as a gift. The parrot was fully grown, with a bad attitude and worse vocabulary. Every other word was profanity.
- Mary attempted to adjust the parrot’s attitude without success. In fact, the parrot only got worse. Rudeness was added to the profanity.
- Finally, in a moment of desperation, Mary put the parrot in the freezer to get a moment of peace.
- She heard the bird swearing, squawking, and screaming. And then there was absolute silence. Frightened that she might have hurt the bird, she opened the freezer door.
- The parrot stepped gently onto Mary’s arm and said, “I am sorry if I offended you with my language and my actions and I ask your forgiveness. I will correct my behavior so as to never offend you again with my language.”

- Mary was astounded at the change in the bird's attitude and, was about to ask what had happened to him, when the parrot continued, "May I ask what the chicken did?"
- *Attitude*. When we speak of *attitude* or *stance*, not to mention *position*, *bearing*, or *posture*, it is not obvious from these words whether we are talking about the body or the inner emotional state.
- And, there is a connection. There are straight and upright people, as well as those who are bent or stiff-necked. Don't we know people who are ready to cringe or grovel? Or those who are upstanding.
- Our story this morning is about a woman who has been unable to straighten up for eighteen years.
- Physically, this comes from pressure on the cartilaginous vertebrae, especially in the lumbar area that causes excruciating pain.
- The problem underlying these symptoms comes from overburdening oneself, heaping too much on one's shoulders. The symptoms forcing this woman to take it easy, for every movement, every activity hurts.
- This woman is weighted down by the burden of her life....
- So, let's talk about bodily symptoms.
- There are three levels to consider.
- Every bodily symptom starts out on the spiritual level. This is symbolized by the dove far above us in the sanctuary. Our dove points to this lofty level, high up there. And, we don't always have the language to describe our suffering on the spiritual level.
- At this lofty level, though, our suffering likely has to do with ongoing experiences of not feeling loved, not being accepted, feeling out of place, not feeling connected, feeling anxious or fearful, a lack of self-esteem or self-confidence, not knowing a sense of safety. All, ultimately having something to do with our lack of a living relationship with a living God.

- But only a few of us can find our way to this spiritual place of healing early in life. Most of us can't find the words or describe our spiritual malaise until we are well into our forties or fifties which means we don't resolve our inner issues in our younger years.
- What happens, then, is that the spiritual wounds roll downhill into the psychological level. On the level of the soul, which has to do with depth, instead of the heights. As if a compensation takes place. From on high to down under. This means the spiritual issues enter our relationships—with ourselves, with other people, with the world around us.
- We're usually hesitant to mess with our relationships with other people. Most of us don't like conflict. We are often afraid of making matters worse. And the ability to self-reflect and be self-aware is a hard-fought victory. The unexamined life may not be worth living, but many of us live it anyway....
- The culture still has a prejudice against therapy. We should be able to handle our own problems. Only the weak or the mentally ill need the help of psychology. So, the spiritual issues, which have rolled downhill into the psychological realm remain unaddressed and finally roll downhill into the body.
- And now our spiritual illness and our psychological pain take up their home in our bodily symptoms. **Now** they have our attention. To the point, that our healthcare system, almost always addressing only our bodily symptoms, is a gargantuan industry....
- Most ailments in the gospels deal with the body, as in the case of this woman. Jesus meets us where we live and most of us only begin to deal with our issues when our body is affected. Frankly, even when Jesus deals with the psychological realm, most pastors and theologians miss the point.
- Yet Jesus points us to the reality that there is a spirit behind this woman's bent bodily bearing.
- He's pointing us to the spiritual level.
- Think about it. Four-legged animals protect the most vulnerable parts of the body. But once we human stood upright in our evolution, our vulnerability was exposed.
- This woman is bent over. Reflect on the image.

- She is dominated by a spirit of self-protection. She is in a spiritually submissive stance, perhaps a cringing posture. A position of shame? Likely unable to look anyone in the eye, because she is staring at the ground, which is what we all do when we are filled with shame.
- This is a stance of inferiority. A position that says she is unlovable as she is.
- I imagine this woman overachieved for years and took care of everyone and everything as a way to compensate for her lack of esteem and her sense of inferiority.
- That's what we do. If we cannot find love just because we are the person we are, then we do: overwork, take care of everyone and their feelings, stay busy.
- If you won't love me just for me, maybe you will love me for how much I do.
- In sixth grade, I played, practiced and took lessons on two instruments—piano and trumpet. I had the largest paper route in Columbus, Ohio, seven days a week, Confirmation 9-12 every Saturday, with memorization of the Luther's Catechism, always in church on Sunday, studied some, played in countless musical groups and still I was seen by my parents as lazy and irresponsible. Almost impossible for me to determine when I've done enough.
- We are human beings always in danger of becoming human doings.
- This woman is bent to the ground by the weight of her doing—the weight of her suffering.
- Reading this story, I imagine Jesus placing his hands gently on her shoulders where the weight of her suffering symbolically rests. And lifting her upright so that she and he are eyeball-to-eyeball, Jesus lovingly meeting her gaze, erasing the burden of shame, "woman, you are set free." Jesus is speaking to the psychological and spiritual dimensions that have forced her to the ground.
- And this brilliant narrative gives us an immediate insight into the cause of the suffering.

- The religious leaders, the upright, self-righteous, bearers of the way things ought to be, instantly condemn Jesus for healing on the sabbath, the day on which any work is not to be done. For healing was considered work.
- They are indignant. This is a lofty, arrogant, condemning posture and they direct their judgment toward **her**: “there are six days to work. Come and be healed on one of those days.”
- Jesus blasts them: “you hypocrites!” His attack lets them know that he understands that it is **their attitude, their stance, their position** that creates the religious and cultural climate that contributes to this woman’s condition.
- They regularly water their donkeys on the sabbath, so in their minds, this woman is not even worth as much as their ass. And she has been submitting to this pretentious, judgmental, and demeaning attitude for decades.
- We’d be bent over, too.
- In my first congregation in rural Virginia, we were often invited to dinner with two couples in their late seventies.
- And the first time, I was puzzled because the two women hosting the dinner did not sit down with us. They stood and hovered over the table, making sure we had everything we needed.
 - More iced tea?
 - How about some more ham?
 - Have you tried the green beans?
 - Another biscuit?
- I was uncomfortable, both because I didn’t understand the tradition and because it felt like these kind women were being my servants.
- When I asked them to sit with us, they shooshed me, “Oh, Pastor.” But I thought, so they eat the leftovers? They eat cold food or have to reheat everything? What if that huge man sitting across from me has a fourth helping of mashed potatoes? Will there be anything left?

- But it was the country attitude, the rural stance. The men and guests ate and the women, who had cooked all the food and set the table, then sat and ate. And then they cleaned up and washed the dishes.
 - As I went to put my plate in the sink, one of the women intercepted me quicker than Joe Haden.
- I'm sure at one time, this tradition made practical sense. These men were once farmers and manual laborers. They broke their backs and the women took care of their men.
- But tradition eventually solidifies, becomes rigid and demanding, eventually killing the spirit and soul.
- In confronting the religious leaders of his day, Jesus rejects the tradition that has become so inhumane that beasts of burden are more valuable than a woman who carries this unbearable burden....
- The spirit that frees always find itself in conflict with established tradition. And those invested in the established tradition do not give up without a fight.
- Sometimes even leading them to nail a man to a cross because he set the wrong people free.
- I hope this doesn't sound too lofty, because it is meant to be down to earth. I see my ministry among you as providing the means by which we address our suffering on the psychological and spiritual planes.
- In part, this is what church is meant to be. A safe place where we can explore the burdens of our lives on the spiritual and soulful levels and find healing before we become bent over by the weight of our burdens.
- SERMON SONG: **WHENEVER GOD SHINES HIS LIGHT** BY VAN MORRISON