

Rev. Dr. Gary Shahinian  
Sermon  
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Park Congregational Church  
Worcester, Massachusetts

## “Being Bent”

Scripture Text: Luke 13:10-17

Dear people of God, have you known someone like the woman in our Scripture Lesson today? She was a bent woman, a woman who has been stooped over for so long that she can no longer look up. Can you imagine not being able to look people in the eyes? Can you imagine not being able to look at the blue sky? Can you imagine talking to people while staring down at the ground the whole time? This poor woman in our story has been crippled in this way for 18 years. Can you imagine?

When I served on the Massachusetts Conference Committee on Local Church Life and Renewal, our Conference Minister for the committee was the late Susan Dickerman. She led a devotion one time using this story. She asked our committee members, “What in your own experience might cause a woman to be bent over for 18 years?”

Like most committees of the Massachusetts Conference, our committee was divided equally between men and women. But it was the women on the committee who seemed to be most vocal. One woman

answered, “Her children! Eighteen years is the minimum sentence motherhood brings.” Another woman member replied, “Maybe her husband! Picking up his dirty clothes on the floor for 18 years probably made her permanently bent over.” Still another woman on the committee suggested, “She was probably all bent out of shape trying to balance the checkbook for a family of maybe 10 or 12, making sure to stretch every penny that came into the household.”

Though these comments were made half in jest, they opened the minds of the committee members to new ways of identifying with this woman. All of us are bent in life in one way or another, at one time or another.

In the pre-scientific world in which Jesus lived, his diagnosis of the woman’s ailment was that Satan had bound her for 18 long years. From the time of the Book of Job, Satan was blamed for any debilitating disease or natural calamity or premature death. Anything that didn’t seem to fit in the Eden that God had created was attributed to powers of evil, Satan being the most inclusive symbol of that evil. Though any faithful Jew at that time would say that ultimately all things come from God, both good and evil, again following the Book of Job, she would also say that evil seems to come secondhand, that is, God merely allows Satan

to do certain kinds of evil. One of the lessons that we're supposed to learn from the Book of Job, which even Jesus learned, was that evil doesn't come directly from God.

We should be aware of not only her physical suffering, but the psychological toll it took on her, as she wished not to be seen. She wasn't one who rushed to the front of the synagogue to sit with her female friends, but was careful to stay way in the back. Jesus didn't even notice her at first as he was teaching. She was probably lurking somewhere in a corner in the back, away from view. Suddenly, however, she caught his eye in the middle of his sermon. Upon observing her, Jesus calls her over and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment" (Luke 13:12). He then lays his healing hands upon her, and she immediately stands up straight and begins to praise God.

We don't realize what a revolutionary act Jesus performed in this story. He breaks no less than six cultural rules, or if you're a strict Jewish legalist, six religious laws in this one act of healing. Jesus knew that this act of healing would be controversial. Why then does he do it? Because he's trying to awaken his fellow Jewish believers to the kind of life God wants for them. The central message of Jesus's preaching was the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. They're the same thing. In this

kingdom of which he wishes his followers to be members, all persons have equal worth and dignity. He shows this in action in this story in these six ways.

First, Jesus speaks to the woman. In that patriarchal culture, Jewish men did not speak to women who were not relatives. Remember the story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman in John chapter 4. Both the woman and his disciples were astonished that Jesus would speak to her in public. In addressing this bent woman in the synagogue in our story this morning, Jesus shatters the male restraints on women's freedom and speaks to her as a fellow human.

Second, he calls her to the center of the synagogue. By placing her in the geographic middle, he challenges the notion of male monopoly on access to God and learning about God.

Next, Jesus touches the woman when he heals her. There is no getting around the fact that he's breaking the holiness code recorded in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus when he does this. This code was written to protect men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness. By touching the woman, Jesus was calling that section of the holiness code nonsense. By the way, another section of the holiness code states, "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an

abomination” (Leviticus 18:22). Maybe Jesus would call that nonsense also.

Fourth, Jesus calls this woman a “daughter of Abraham.” By doing that, he’s naming her. Names are very important. Names are very powerful. That’s one of the reasons why we’re going to start wearing name tags next month. When Jesus names this woman, he’s making her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God.

Fifth, he heals on the sabbath day, the holy day. According to a strict, literal interpretation of the Ten Commandments, Jesus sins when he heals this woman. Of course, it’s preposterous that Jesus could have sinned. And so, the only alternative is that we need to have a different understanding of not only the Ten Commandments, but of the entire Word of God found in the Old and New Testaments. Jesus is trying to teach those present that day in the synagogue that God has compassion for people over ceremony, and that the sabbath needs to be reclaimed for the celebration of God’s goodness. Its observance is not some legalistic duty that oppresses people and is impervious to their suffering.

Last, but not least, Jesus challenges the ancient belief that this woman’s illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. While

recognizing her illness, he never claims that it was God's will. Rather, using the language accessible to him, Jesus clearly attributes the woman's condition to the bondage of Satan, in other words, to the powers of evil that can ravage anyone.

Needless to say, the breaking of these six cultural rules did not go unnoticed by those present in the synagogue. The leader of the synagogue in fact becomes indignant at Jesus for curing on the sabbath, and sternly speaks to the crowd: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day" (Luke 13:14).

Here's the leader of the synagogue, the Jewish leader of that town who should know better. But he doesn't. This healing of Jesus wasn't written in the bulletin. It wasn't part of the Order of Worship. The synagogue leader is a strict legalist. He doesn't like last minute changes. He's shocked by Jesus's behavior. "Who does this Jesus guy think he is? Here I have given him the opportunity to teach the lesson on the sabbath and he takes over the whole service doing whatever he pleases."

There's the story of a church visitor who repeatedly shouted "Amen" or "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah" during the worship service. Finally the usher walked down the aisle to his pew and escorted the

gentleman out of the sanctuary. The man asked, “Why?” The usher replied, “You’re making too much noise. You’re disturbing the service.” The man answered, “I just feel full of the Holy Spirit.” The usher responded, “Well, you didn't get it here, so get out!”

The synagogue leader is telling Jesus, “You didn’t get the power of God here. Not on the sabbath!” But Jesus answers him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13:15-16).

Jesus reacts with strong language because the leader of the synagogue just doesn’t get it. He doesn’t share Jesus’s revolutionary understanding of God’s nature. Jesus saw God’s will as focused on people, not on rules. Rules exist for people, not the other way around. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus declares, “The sabbath was made for people; not people for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Many today still look at God as a rule-maker, sinners as rule-breakers, and the upright as rule-keepers. We need a new way of looking at it.

When I teach ethics, one of the basic questions I have my students

think about is, “What are the principles we use to determine ethical or moral behavior?” In the history of philosophy, there have been two basic camps in regard to ethics: the deontologists and the teleologists. You don’t need to remember those words. But you should remember what they mean. A deontologist is someone who believes that the rightness of an act is determined in itself apart from its consequences. A teleologist is someone who believes that the rightness of an act is determined by its aim, goal, or purpose. So, for example, if you’re hiding a Jew in your house and the Nazis knock on your door and ask, “Are there any Jews in your house?” if you’re a deontologist, the ethical response would be “Yes,” but if you’re a teleologist, the ethical response would be “No.” The deontologist believes that telling the truth is right in itself, and so, must answer “Yes” to the Nazis without taking into consideration what would happen to the Jews. The teleologist believes that answering “Yes” would be a lie, because it would be bearing false witness to the hiding Jews because of the harm that would come to them, and so, the teleologist believes that answering “No” would not be a lie, but in fact fulfilling the ethical requirement.

Many Jews in Jesus’s day were deontologists. God’s rules were ends in themselves. The rules were first and the needs of the people were

secondary. Many still hold that view today.

But Jesus presents a profoundly different view of God, sin, and righteousness. It's one that looks to the aim, goal, or purpose of the rules. It's a view more compatible with teleologists. It's one that puts people first, not the rules. It's one where ethical behavior is determined according to what reflects the realm or reign of God. For Jesus, God's chief concern is not about slavish obedience, but about loving and caring for people and the good creation that God has allowed us to enjoy. God is not a rule-maker, but a life-giver.

Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. That's why God created us. All of those rules, commandments, and laws of the Old Testament were given so that God's people could lead abundant lives. Jesus makes that clear when he announces his message as the Gospel, which means "good news." The Gospel is good news, not just for some, but for everyone.

All of us are bent in some way. Life has a way of beating us down, zapping our energy, and crushing our aspirations. Little by little we find ourselves being bent over from failures, disappointments, and guilt. Where can we go to find how we can become unbent? Here in church. Here as we come together as a family of faith in the God of Jesus Christ.

Here as we gather as those who care for one another and uphold one another.

Many of you know that I was a member of the Christian Reformed denomination for 15 years. One of the gifted musicians of the CRC, who also happens to be blind, is the songwriter Ken Medema. I will quote from his song, “If This Is Not a Place”:

If this is not a place, where tears are understood, then where shall I go to cry?  
And if this is not a place, where my spirit can take wings, then where shall I go to fly?  
I don't need another place, for trying to impress you with just how good and virtuous I am.  
No, no, no, I don't need another place, for always being on top of things.  
Everybody knows it's a sham, it's a sham.  
I don't need another place, for always wearing smiles even when it's not the way I feel.  
I don't need another place, to mouth the same old platitudes; everybody knows that it's not real.  
So if this is not a place, where my questions can be asked, then where shall I go to seek?  
And if this is not a place where my heart cry can be heard, where, tell me where, shall I go to speak?  
So if this is not a place where tears are understood, where shall I go, where shall I go to fly?

Jesus's actions in our Sermon Lesson today say to all of us here, “This is indeed the place.” Amen.