

STAND TALL
September 9th, 2018

Texts

Isaiah 35: 3-6, 10
Psalm 146
Luke 13: 10-17

Introduction

I was having a conversation with someone the other day about illness & aging. And I remarked that planning for future health is often a case of “picking your poison.” The medical treatment or lifestyle choice that prevents one condition is all too likely to cause another. Our best option is to do what we can to avoid the ONE illness that we personally dread the most.

My biggest fear of all is motor neurone disease – ALS. As there’s absolutely nothing I can do about that, I do my best to avoid my 2nd worst fear – osteoporosis. Like most of you, I’ve seen the tragedy of elderly women shortened & broken & bent double by the devastation that the loss of oestrogen does to the female skeleton. It’s an image that I find terrifying!
No one should have to go through life looking at the ground!
Which, of course, is why Luke’s story of the crippled woman is so compelling.

A Stooped Woman

The Gospel writer describes her as being bent over & unable to stand up straight. Most interpreters assume that the unnamed woman had a spinal condition such as kyphosis.

But the Greek text says that she had been crippled by a "spirit of weakness" for 18 yrs. And Jesus stated that she had been bound by Satan. (v.16)
These remarks suggest that the woman’s problems were psychological rather than physical.

She may have suffered from severe depression or been a victim of prolonged abuse. The “evil” of domestic violence might have bowed & bent this poor woman. Maybe, life as a poor woman in a patriarchal society simply got the better of her. “Bondage to Satan” is a pretty accurate way of describing a lifetime of oppression & abuse.

Emotionally, this woman could no longer hold her head up. And, as we all know, if muscles & joints remain in one position for long enough they lose their flexibility & mobility.

Dr. Luke describes her condition with convincing accuracy.
"She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight."

Think about life lived like that ...
the physical pain
the limited view – constantly looking downwards;
having to stretch and strain to see a loved one’s face;

never seeing the stars.

This had gone on for 18 yrs.

18 years at a time when most people didn't live past their 40's.

Whether her bent posture was caused by emotional stress, mental illness or an orthopaedic deformity, this unfortunate woman had suffered deeply.

Yet, despite all this, she remained a woman of faith. Pain & shame had not prevented her from going to the synagogue on the Sabbath.

There is no suggestion that she had come for Jesus to heal her. Given her limited field of vision she may not even have seen him there.

The woman in Luke's narrative had come to worship God.

According to the Gospel account, Jesus took all the initiative. He sees her come in and interrupts his teaching to call her over.

Women were restricted to the back of the worship space. But segregation & discrimination weren't part of Jesus' agenda. So he asked her to come forward to where he was standing.

Jesus called her to move from the fringe to the centre of the worshipping community.

Life with Jesus is NOT lived on the margins!

It is front & centre living!

When she comes up to him, he places his hands on her & tells her that she is free – or "loosed" - from her ailment.

(Same word as loosening bonds or chains.)

The woman immediately stands up straight and bursts into praise & thanksgiving.

In a place where women were supposed to be both unseen & unheard, this woman proudly shows off her healed body & shouts out her thankfulness to God.

For years, she had known nothing but the pain & isolation of a disabling illness.

Now, she not only stands up, she dares to speak up as well!

Jesus had healed her broken body & liberated her suffocated spirit.

She was a woman transformed!

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Of course, "no good deed goes unpunished" so Jesus was immediately reprimanded by the leader of the synagogue.

Like many people, this man thought that religion is all about obeying the rules.

And knowing your proper place in society is up there with "thou shalt not kill" or "steal".

In the Judaism of his day, women didn't go up to the front of the synagogue or lead praise & worship sessions! So his female parishioner's newly found liberation didn't earn her any brownie points.

Jesus was in deep trouble too.
He had violated the Sabbath work ban.

And he didn't care diddlysquat!

When you have a personal relationship with God, rules & regulations come a distant second to kindness & compassion.

Jesus explained this to the crotchety clergyman who challenged him.
He pointed out that, just as one gives water to one's animals on the Sabbath, so one should provide relief for a human being in distress.

In the only recorded use of the term, Jesus refers to the woman as a "daughter of Abraham" & rhetorically inquires why she should be made to suffer even one more day.
Righteous men were referred to as "sons of Abraham" but there was no female equivalent until Jesus used it.

Jesus was telling the woman - & the other worshippers in the synagogue - that she was included in the blessings that were given to Abraham & his descendants.

Blessings that included liberation from bondage.

This woman was beloved & precious to God. She was as deserving of God's grace as Abraham himself.

In 1st Century Israel, that was about the biggest compliment anyone could receive.

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Jesus not only healed this woman's broken body, he made sure that her spirit was restored to wholeness as well.

He let her know that, in God's eyes, she rated!
She was right up with Abraham & his offspring.

Uprighting Humanity

Jesus straightened out her spine & her straightened up her spirit.

Healing of the body and the mind and the soul were all part of his mission to restore broken humanity.

He announced this mission at the very beginning of his public ministry. Luke 4 records that Jesus told his home synagogue he had been called to free people from all forms of oppression - political, economic, religious & personal.

Jesus made it his personal goal to set the fallen on their feet & help the downcast stand tall. He wanted to raise people up from whatever circumstance had knocked them down.

As I was thinking about all the ways that Jesus helped people straighten out & straighten up, an old – not very pleasant – American word came to mind: uppity.

As you all know, this word was first applied to slaves & then people of colour to demean any efforts at betterment.

Since then, it has been used to disparage people whose race, religion, gender or class does not match one's own.

It is an expression that is designed to diminish or suppress people who are trying to stand UP for themselves or rise UP from the bottom of the socio-economic ladder or speak UP against power & privilege.

Uppity is how we become when we refuse to let the status quo define who we are.

And uppity is exactly what Jesus hoped for in his followers.

The bent & bowed woman became an uppity dame once she encountered Jesus.

Men who had been healed developed sudden uppityness.

The foreigner & the poor person, the disenfranchised & the despised – those whose lives were touched by Jesus found themselves transformed.

No longer were they part of the downtrodden masses.

With Jesus' help, they had become uppity sons & daughters of God.

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The Divine desire for all people to walk tall is found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Slaves were freed, women empowered to lead, & society's least & lowest raised up.

Who but God would base the founding of a nation on the actions of a prostitute?!

If you want to know God better, read the story of Rahab!

Whoever you are & whatever you've done, liberation is yours for the asking.

On God's side no one – ever – has to hang their head in shame or submission.

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We know these Gospel healing stories so well that we sometimes miss the nuances.

Why, for example, did Jesus not simply walk back to where the disabled woman stood?

What was his motivation in calling her forward?

Firstly, of course, it was to bring her out from her fringe existence.

But Jesus also needed her to be involved in her healing.

Straightening out & standing up are choices that only we can make.
God will help us.

God will do 99.9% of the work but WE have to make the first move – literally!
And so Jesus asked this woman to come up to where he stood.

Now, this was NOT a Billy Graham Crusade or a healing service conducted by some tele-evangelist!
Choirs weren't singing Gospel songs in the background.

Instead, this poor, broken woman had to walk past a crowd of people – first women, then men – who were outraged by her actions.
Tongues & fingers would have wagged in criticism.
Some worshippers would have hissed at her to go back where she came from; others might have looked away in disgust.

When you make a decision to stand up for yourself it isn't all sweetness & light!

But this lady was bone weary –literally!
Constant pain & a continual view of the dirt had brought her to a place of desperation.
With great hope & even greater courage, she went forward.

To her joy & amazement, Jesus not only corrected her spine, he healed her heart.

“Praise God!” she shouted!

Praise God indeed!

Conclusion

Jesus restored this brave woman to wholeness by letting her know that she was a daughter of Abraham. All the blessings & promises God gave to Abraham & his descendants were hers for the asking.

We too are children of God's covenantal blessings.

The promise to free us from whatever holds us captive, the promise to foster our wellbeing, & the promise of spiritual blessings are still operational.

All we need is the courage to go forward in faith.