

WPC
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The Bent Woman
Luke 13:10-17

Henri Nouwen tells the story of an old holy man who saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the water of the River Ganges. The old man leaned out over the water, hanging to some roots, and tried to rescue the scorpion. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively he withdrew his hand. A few seconds later, having regained his balance, he stretched himself out again. This time the scorpion stung him so badly that his hand became swollen and bloody. The old man's face contorted with pain.

Just then a passerby saw the old man stretched out over the roots struggling with the scorpion. He yelled, "Hey, stupid, old man! What's wrong with you? Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of an ugly, evil creature! Don't you know you could kill yourself trying to save that ungrateful scorpion?" The old man turned to the stranger and said calmly, "My friend, just because it is the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save."¹

In reaching out to redeem us, God often gets stung. Jesus performs a wonderful act of compassion by healing a woman who was crippled and

¹ Henri Nouwen, Quoted in Brennan Manning, *The Signature of Jesus*, Multnomah, 2004, pp. 126-27.

bent over for 18 years, and in return he gets stung with criticism from the indignant leader of the synagogue.

I'm moved by the plight of this woman who's been bound and bent by an invisible spirit for such a long time. In Luke 13, this story appears between a passage about a barren fig tree, fruitless for three years, yet graciously given one more year to mature and bear fruit, and a passage about the kingdom of God that compares it to a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree large enough for the birds of the air to build nests in its branches. The bent woman is between a tree that produces nothing and a tree that provides sanctuary, foreshadowing the coming of the kingdom of God. But that kingdom will not come without plenty of stings.

Notice that this woman comes to the synagogue to worship, not to be healed. She's not looking to be cured, but we get a strong sense of her faithfulness, as she immediately praises God when healed.

If any of you are brave and willing to try a little physical experiment, please try standing up. I invite you now to join me in an exercise. Now, lean over 45 degrees to have a sense of the woman's predicament. Feel the strain on the lower back, the burden on the neck and shoulders as you try to look around. Notice how bending this way limits your vision of what lies around you. Your perspective is effected. Stooping, it's difficult to look into

the faces of those around you, because you're not on the same level with everyone else. You're stuck in a humbling position. It's easy to see how you could become the butt of derision and cruel jokes. (OK, you may now straighten up and be seated).

The controversy in the story is over timing, not on the fact that the woman got healed or that Jesus, in healing her, touched her. The leader of the synagogue is indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath – notice that he doesn't address Jesus directly. Instead, he talks to the crowd, saying, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Before we assail this leader for his lack of compassion and concern, let's consider what he says. Keeping the Sabbath day holy is a big commandment, so big that it's included in the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. Why didn't Jesus just wait a day to heal, instead of stirring up so much controversy by healing on the sabbath? In this story, the woman's back had been bent for eighteen years. Couldn't she wait just one more day? What difference would it make?

Maybe not much difference to us, but to that woman, it made all the difference in the world. If our brief exercise of stooping over had been prolonged, we would have come to know that even one more minute in that

position could have seemed intolerable. That's reason enough to not wait to heal this woman. But for Jesus, I believe it went beyond helping to relieve physical discomfort.

This woman is described as being crippled with a spirit. She is bound by her infirmity. Notice how Luke plays with the words "bound" and "loose." Jesus loosed the woman from the infirmity in which Satan had bound her. If the Jewish law permitted the loosing of a bound (tethered) animal for watering on the Sabbath, should it not be permitted that this woman, a daughter of Abraham bound for 18 long years, be loosed from Satan's bond on the Sabbath?

If anyone is bound by any kind of infirmity or injustice, if we're to follow the example of Jesus, we're called to action right away. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that justice delayed is justice denied. It's always the right time to do the right thing.

And the really beautiful thing about this story is that it's not only about justice, but about love. Jana Childers, preaching professor at SFTS, says, "We have a God, Luke assures us, who is soft, empathic, gentle; whose kindness is unfathomable. We have a God who cranes, who reaches, who loves us before faith kicks in and when it gives out. Don't let anybody tell you that you have to scrape yourself together and run to God, that you have

to screw up your will to do the right thing, that you have to dig deep and find your faith and offer it to God before God will speak to you. You have a God who loves you, who yearns for you, who, as the poet Roberta Bondi remind us, is in love with you...According to Luke, there is no overstating the tenderness of God's love. Or the healing power of tenderness."²

Childers tells a story about a little girl living in a rural community. It was just a few years ago, but it was one of those towns where driving down Center Street is like driving back into the thirties. She lived in a little house and went to a two-room school. She had loving folks and, from time to time, a good teacher. But the way she was growing up was not the way you would want your little girl to grow up. She had a cleft palate and the money for the repair hadn't been there. By the time she was seven, she knew what the world was. She had heard the phrase, "only a mother could love that" and she understood it.

One day a special teacher visited the school and put the children through some basic speech tests. When it was her turn, the little girl went into the classroom that had been set aside for the exams. "Just stand over there by the door," the teacher said from her desk at the far end of the room.

² Jana Childers, "The Kyphotic Woman" 30 Good Minutes, 2005.

“I want to test your hearing first. Turn your back, face the door and tell me what you hear me say.”

“Apple,” the teacher said in a low voice.

“Apple,” the little girl repeated.

“Man,” the teacher said.

“Man,” the little girl repeated.

“Banana.”

“Banana.”

“Okay,” the teacher said, “Now a sentence.” The child knew that the sentences were usually fairly easy—she wasn’t the first child to take the test, after all. She’d heard you could expect something like, “The sky is blue” or “Are your shoes brown?” Still, she listened very carefully.

So it was that standing with her face against the door, she heard the teacher’s whisper quite clearly, “I wish you were my little girl.”

The God who saw a daughter of Abraham in a bent woman, is the same God who sees his own child in you. Our God loves us as his own.

Thanks be to God. Amen.