

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
By Eric Howell
“The Power that has Overcome the World”
Luke 13
August 22, 2010

When you read scripture, particularly the Gospel of Luke, if you stay open to the story, you begin to see some patterns emerge. One of those patterns is in Jesus Himself. He is always looking to lift up people who are hurting. The way His mother puts it before He is born when she imagines the life her son will live, the way she puts it is that He “has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” This down-goes-up, and up-comes-down pattern is all through the way Jesus approaches the world until the moment He becomes the pattern. He, who is the Son of God, lets the world bring Him low, even to death on a cross and burial in a tomb, to lift up all of us who are low in all sorts of ways to God.

In Luke 13, the pattern emerges again. The Son of God meets a daughter of Abraham. Jesus meets a woman in an encounter that is repeated more or less several times in the Gospels. Jesus meets someone who is hurting in some way, usually sick -- lame, deaf, blind, demon-possessed; in this case a woman who is bent over, suffering from a disabling spirit for 18 years. Jesus heals the person, often on the Sabbath, often by touching the person; breaking all sorts of official and unofficial rules about proper behavior. You aren't supposed to touch lepers. Jesus puts His hands on a leper's head. You aren't supposed to talk to women in public. Jesus does it all the time. You aren't supposed to do anything much on the Sabbath day. It's a day for God, not for people. A woman that He talks to -- a Sabbath healing --touching the untouchable; this story has it all. Then Jesus gets scolded by the religious authorities for breaking the rules. He responds. They get mad, and madder and madder with each time this happens.

In this case, the religious leader, predictably as others do in his shoes in the Gospel stories, takes exception to the unorthodox actions of Jesus, particularly healing on the Sabbath. The many Sabbath requirements were a heavy burden on all the people as the religious leaders policed its observance with strict diligence. His response is basically, “She's been this way for 18 years. What's one more day? She can come back any other day of the week to have her problem solved. This is the day for rest and worship, not a day to be healed.”

Adding to the burden is the distinction he draws; this difference between Sabbath day and days you can be healed. It would be as if we were to say that worship is not for broken people or bent-over people; that church is not for hurting people, but only about the inner, individual, sanitized, perfected, purified prayers of a harmonious people, and not for the pain, sadness, anguish, oppression, sinfulness and suffering that we experience in real life. It would be like suggesting that there is a difference between people who can come in here and those who live out there; that we are ourselves divided between Sunday and the rest of the week. Jesus challenges this all throughout the Gospels with an invitation to a holistic life lived in the Spirit of God that anticipates God's healing presence at any place, at any time, with any person who is open to God in their lives.

Here He takes on the religious establishment, pointing out their hypocrisy toward hurting people. Even the most strident advocates of the strictest interpretations of the law still water their big ol' dumb oxes and sorry ol' donkeys on the Sabbath day. If you do that for even those animals, how can you turn your back on the suffering of this woman, this daughter of Abraham for even one more day? The burden of their system, laden with the hypocrisy, laid on top of their spirit of judgment would be enough weight to double anyone over.

The woman is bent over and cannot straighten herself. The King James translation probably paints the most vivid picture. She is bowed together. She's a taco. As such, her head is low, stooped over. For a praying person, this is a posture of humility before God. But that's when you make a choice to humble yourself; here's someone that life has all but crushed. She has been brought low, her head now low to the ground.

Recently I got a new perspective on that perspective. While on vacation we gave each of our kids a disposable camera to take whatever pictures each of them wanted. At the end of the trip we would develop the photos and have a memory of the vacation through the eyes of each of the kids. After we explained to them why they couldn't see the picture they just took (new concept in a digital age), and how they had to actually cock the wheel on the camera (another new-old concept), we got about what we expected, a lot of blurry pictures of sandcastles and the ocean. But something else emerged that we didn't expect. We got to see the world from a child's perspective, from the perspective much closer to the ground, probably about how the unnamed woman would see the world. The pool in the backyard which for me was vivid shows up in the picture as a glimpse through the slats in the child-safety fence. Pictures of me were of the bottom of my chin. Pictures of the car are of the top of the tires and the bottom of the doors. It's not a different world down there, but it is different. The world seems like a bigger, scarier place than it does from up here --more vulnerable.

The suffering of the woman, which puts her in the same sort of place in relation to the world, is pretty explicit in the story. She has a disabling spirit -- a spiritual condition -- something inside her is broken and has been broken a long time. It's not really clear that it's her fault, like she has a moral failure. Later, Jesus will describe her as someone who has been bound by Satan for these 18 years. That suggests that her suffering is one of oppression. She is not low because she is short, or height-challenged.

She is low because she is bent over, or maybe she's bent over because she's low. Life has bent her in half, brought her low. Most of us who only know standing up straight, probably still know what that feels like inside. It's like when you come home at the end of a full and hard day and you are just whipped, physically exhausted, emotionally drained, spiritually empty, and then you face all that you have to face at home. Know that feeling? Some people feel that every day.

The woman's stuff in life, whatever it is, an oppression from Satan, has bent her over. In this way she is all of us; she is the whole world doubled over there in front of Jesus. One of those photos from our trip is of the ocean. In the photo, even a little bit blurry in the eager shaking hands of a 3 year old, the horizon looks like a perfectly straight line from one end to the other as far as you can see -- perfectly

straight; but this, of course, is an illusion. Go close to the horizon in the ocean and you see it's the most un-straight, wavy thing there is. What appears straight is in constant flux and movement. And if you back up far enough, you also see it's not straight because the horizon is curved, not straight. The place on earth that looks the straightest is actually the most un-straight place there is. In fact, there are no straight lines in nature, not even in West Texas. Even Tennessee pine trees aren't totally straight. There are no straight clouds. There's no absolutely straight part of any of our bodies. Everything in creation has a shape to it. The whole world is bent.

That's why when we do as our mamas told us to do and "stand up straight" for that snapshot in front of the school sign, we are portraying something on the outside that is probably not all true on the inside. The whole world is curved. The world bends all of us in one way or another.

That's why the religious leaders' rigid rules and severe spirit seem so out of place here in this story. It just doesn't seem to fit. That's why the crowd cheered when Jesus healed the woman and loosed her from her suffering. Jesus bent the rules to straighten a person from the inside. He favored mercy -- that bendy, flexible, sometimes unpredictable, wavy way of life over the rigid, defined, straight-lined straight jacket of the rules, the law.

"There are six days to do this work. Come back one of those days to get your healing."

"No, I think we'll do this now, right here, right where some say we aren't supposed to. I think we'll change the rules, or break them if we have to. This woman is bent. She's been bent over long enough. She's suffered enough. One more day would be too many. Woman, you are set free." And He touched her.

We wanted a movie recently in which a speaker used the picture of a backpack, and asked his audience to imagine filling a backpack full of all their stuff: the drawers, knick-knacks on the side table, clothes, phones, stereo, TV. Then the sofa, the car, the house; stuff it all in there and then feel the weight of it. Feel the straps cutting into your shoulders. Try to carry all that weight around.

But you and I know that this stuff, while heavy, is feather-light compared to the stuff most of us carry around inside. If the character in the movie was really astute to the human condition and really wanted to have us be honest about the cripplingly heavy things in our lives, he would have asked us to imagine a backpack filled with the stuff we carry around daily: old resentments, guilt, shame for what we've done and not done, fear of what is coming, responsibilities we don't think we can keep or don't want to, anxiety about finances, jobs, uncertainty about relationships, health concerns. This is the stuff that really sags the shoulders and furrows eyebrows. It's not the physical stuff that's all that heavy. You can sell that stuff. You can give it away. You can walk away from it. It's the stuff you can't just walk away from -- metaphysical, the emotional, the spiritual. I've seen it stop physically swift people in their tracks. I've seen it crush the mighty. I've seen it bend the strong.

Take today for example, right here on the day before a new school year. With all the excitement that is in the air that many people feel on the eve of a new adventure, let us acknowledge all the variety of emotions present here just on that subject . . .

Think about a student who has left home and is on his own for the first time. Will I make friends or be alone? Will I make good grades or fail?

What about parents who are already sentimental, studying the photo of their baby's embarrassed smile in front of the big brick university sign on her first day, which in a way for them was sort of the last day of what was.

And, the teachers who hope they teach well; the janitors and support staff who hope all is repaired on time. Now imagine what you would find if you looked in the backpacks of each of these people and could see past their books and pens to their souls and all the uncertainties and questions. What you are likely carrying today is enough to bend anyone over, double them over, make them not want to get out of bed, put that pack on and carry it around for another day. But to get out of bed is to put it on. To live life is to carry it. That's life. There's some stuff in your pack that can come out. You've been carrying it around too long and it's time to take it out and let it go. There's probably some stuff to put in your pack, it's time to step up and lighten someone else's load a bit. But it's not whether you carry it, but what it does to you as you carry your stuff in your life.

Whatever else we might imagine about the woman in the story, this much we know. She came to Jesus and let Him touch her. And in that touch she found healing. What she was incapable of doing herself, Jesus gave her the power to do. Can you see through her eyes? She's been looking at dirty feet for years -- her own for sure. Now she sees knees, and hands and arms and shirts, necks, big old smiles (except for that one ugly frown from the guy up front), and lays eyes on the eyes of Jesus -- tender, gentle, kind, powerful? What do His eyes look like when He looks at you? As her back straightens; as that weight, that disabling force lifts away from her, her gaze continues up to see windows and shelves, and the sky. Her gaze continues all the way. How far can she see? It seems like she can see to eternity. She lifts all the way up, straight as an arrow. Her gaze, her spirit is lifted to the heavens to praise God. Touched by Jesus, she is free. She is lifted up. We can be too.

Whatever it is that's on your shoulders and in your heart this morning that feels like a heavy weight, you can bring it with you right into worship, right into prayer, straight to God. The sanctuary is not sanitized from the stuff of real life. God invites us to come, not the idealized version of ourselves, not who we think we should be or wish we were, or remember we once were, but we come as we are right now, with all the stuff that's in us and on us. Even if we are bent low this morning and our spiritual vision is pretty dim, we are welcomed to this place and a healing encounter with Jesus Christ who invited us all with these words of healing and grace for all of us who are bent double by the world.

“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28)

Our burdens, as heavy as they feel to us, are not a challenge to God. We are invited to release those burdens into God's hands; to experience the touch of our Healer and to be set free that we may find ourselves able to carry our portion in life,

and maybe some of our brother's and sister's with a strength that is beyond our own.

May you know this freedom in these days. May you know this strength. And may you enter the days to come with a new power unleashed in you, a power that has overcome the world.