

Homily Pentecost 14C
August 21, 2016
Grace, River Forest

Isaiah 58:9b-14
Psalm 103:1-8
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Bent Out of Shape

In Jesus' name. Amen

Perhaps you've not noticed, but I'm what you might call "short" in stature. Being short can cause difficulties. For example, on vacation a week ago in New Orleans, I attended the worship service every day at the ELCA Assembly – something of a busman's holiday, I guess. But as a short person, wherever I sat or stood, I could never see anything of the procession, except for the cross that led the way. And I could hear but never saw the preacher, presider, assisting minister, or lector up in front on the dais. I had an even worse problem, however, in my first apartment in Forest Park, where I lived for seven years after I moved here from St. Louis. The bathroom mirror was so high, I could see nothing but the top of my forehead in it. I am convinced I would look a lot better today if I hadn't missed those seven years.

But studying today's Gospel this past week, the story of a woman who "was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight," I realized that I have nothing to complain about. As one commentary put it, "For eighteen years this unnamed

woman must strain to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. For eighteen years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty.” (Emilie M. Townes, “Theological Perspective,” Proper 16, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, p. 382)

Luke says the woman had “a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.” The length of time might be different, but I suspect many of us here this morning have experienced “a crippling spirit” at some time in our life. Maybe a physical affliction or ailment, like arthritis or osteoporosis. Or maybe a crippling emotion like depression, resentment or anger. Maybe it is guilt over things done or undone that cripples us, or grief over a significant loss – of a loved one, or of *the* perfect job, our health or marriage. Maybe it’s the anxiety about a child and what’s going to become of him, or her. Or worry about finances, and what’s going to become of us. If there is anything that cripples us this morning or has us “all bent out of shape,” there is good news for us in today’s Gospel. And the good news has to do with Jesus and the woman who has been bent over, unable to stand up straight, for 18 years.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when the woman appears. The rest of the congregation seems to take no notice of her. They have become accustomed to her affliction, and take it for granted. Whose afflictions, whose situations, do

we take for granted today? Have we become accustomed to the suffering of refugees, to the poor in our own city, to those families on the west or south side of Chicago who are “bent over” with grief, from losing one child after another to gun violence? Do we still have eyes to see the afflictions and suffering of those around us, including those police officers so crippled by fear that they shoot first in almost every confrontation?

One commentator tells us that, in a crowd, the woman “would have been easy to overlook, quite literally.” (Karoline Lewis, workingpreacher.org, “The Craft of Preaching,” Sunday, August 14, 2016) But Luke tells us that Jesus “sees” the woman and calls her to himself. She doesn’t ask to be healed, and Jesus never says a word about her faith. The initiative in this story is all his. The only thing we know is that Jesus declares, “You are set free from your ailment!” And when he lays his hands on her, “Immediately,” Luke says, “she stood up straight and began praising God.”

Bible scholar Karoline Lewis writes: “Once only able to stare at the ground,...only able to look at her own feet or those of another and never into their eyes, now she can see faces. Now she can see where she is going....She is now [even] able to see what and who Jesus sees – who needs to be cured. Who is in bondage. Those who are bent over with the weight of a world that continues

not to care.” (*Ibid.*) Standing upright now, the woman begins praising God. Lewis even suggests that the words of praise the woman used could very well have been the words of today’s psalm:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name,
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God’s benefits –
who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases;
...and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.” (Psalm 103:1-4)

Jesus, we remember, is on his way to Jerusalem, to suffer and die. And yet, yet, he sees and desires to set this woman free from what cripples her. Jesus always has the time, takes the time, for the daughters and sons of Abraham, to heal them from their afflictions. And who are Abraham’s daughters and sons? Both Jews and Muslims, by birth to father Abraham, and us Christians, too, children of Abraham by faith.

But there is a second person “all bent out of shape” in this story – the ruler of the synagogue. He is “indignant” because Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. Jesus should have known better; you’re not supposed to work on the Sabbath. He could have waited and healed the woman of her affliction any other day later that week. But Jesus reveals the ruler’s hypocrisy: “You will loosen the rope tying up your donkey to give it water on the Sabbath. But this is not an

animal. It's 'a daughter of Abraham.' She has been bound by this affliction 'for eighteen long years.' That's eighteen years too long. I couldn't delay setting her free a single day longer."

And Jesus also reveals the cause of the woman's affliction. It was Satan who bound her with this crippling spirit, not God, nor anyone else. And Jesus' freeing her from this bondage was a foreshadowing, a sign, of the whole purpose of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, of carrying on himself to the cross all the infirmities and disfigurements of our lives, caused by Satan and sin and death. Jesus couldn't delay one more single day to die and rise again to set us and a whole world free from Satan's bondage.

But...but...there's still mop-up skirmishes going on in this world today. There's still an urgency to "see" those who are suffering and seek to alleviate what cripples them. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a *Letter from the Birmingham Jail* 53 years ago, to white clergy in Birmingham, Alabama, who wanted African Americans to delay for another day their push and public protest for justice. Some people in power today still get "indignant," "all bent out of shape," when church people, disciples of Christ Jesus, stand up for those *still* "bent over" by racism, or when Jesus' disciples stand up and speak out against the proliferation of guns, of assault rifles, *military weapons*, in so many hands today. But time after time, if we

won't stand up straight and say something, we will see again the cost of justice delayed: in more suffering, in more people "bent over," in more deaths.

I heard a speaker a week ago at the ELCA Assembly in New Orleans, Leahmah Gbowee, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. She is a born and bred Liberian Lutheran, and is best known for leading the nonviolent movement that brought together Christian and Muslim women to play a pivotal role in ending Liberia's devastating, 14-year civil war in 2003. She was asked to speak at the ELCA Assembly as a prelude to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, next year. She reminded us all of something I had forgotten: that Martin Luther was a "trouble maker." He stood up to, and defied, the most powerful institution of his time, in the defense of the Gospel.

When Luther did that, of course, he was following another "trouble maker" and "rule breaker," Jesus himself, who couldn't delay even one day, to set a daughter of Abraham free from that which crippled her, from Satan's bondage. I'm beginning to believe that part of our baptismal call today as the body of Christ is a call to be "trouble makers," for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of all the daughters and sons of Abraham, still "bent over."

For isn't it true that the only reason any of us are here in church today is due to God's initiative, due to Christ "seeing" us and our needs, and calling us to

himself by the Gospel? Jesus won't lay his hands on us today, but he will again place in our hands a piece of bread and a chalice for a sip of wine, his own body and blood, broken and poured out for us for our release from all the "binds" us and bends us out of shape. So that we can "stand upright" and praise God in voice and deed. Who knows? Maybe even by becoming a "rule breaker" and "trouble maker."

In Jesus' name. Amen