

Luke 13: 10 – 17

'She Stood Up Straight'

Introduction ...

We don't know her name. We don't know where she comes from. We don't know why she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day our Gospel reading records. But maybe we can picture her. A weary woman, resilient and resigned. A woman "bent over" and "quite unable to stand up". A woman who spends her long days staring at the ground, staring at her own feet, staring at the dusty sandals of those who pass her by on the road. Not because she wants to avoid eye contact, or miss each morning's sunrise, or forget what the stars look like, or never raise her face to the evening breeze, but because she has no other choice.

The life of the woman:

Luke tells us that by the time the bent over woman encounters Jesus, she's been crippled for eighteen years. I wonder if she showed up for worship every weekend during those exhausting two decades. I wonder if anyone noticed her. I wonder what hope or meaning or solace the weekly ritual afforded her – if any. I wonder what sort of life she shuffled home to, afterwards.

According to the text, the woman doesn't ask Jesus for help when she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day in question. He's teaching – most likely surrounded by a crowd. She doesn't approach him. Who knows if she even notices him, bent over as she is? But he sees her. He *sees* her. When he calls her over and she approaches, he puts his sermon on hold, and says the thing Jesus always says in the Gospels when he encounters the sick, the broken, the dying, the dead: **"You are set free from your ailment."**

The story of the woman is both immediate and distant. It is immediate because we can feel the pain and isolation of the affected woman. It is distant because we are unlikely to be able to reproduce the healing that Jesus enacts in the synagogue on that sabbath.

For us ...

Who we notice and with whom we interact

So, what does the incident say to us? One thing is that Jesus highlights the fact that the woman had been attending in her condition for 18 years, yet no one seems to have seen her or helped her. Who are the people in our community who have been around for ages and need us to reach out to them in a practical way, but whom we have not seen or have ignored?

Then there's ...

Our reaction to disturbance

As soon as Jesus unbinds the crippled woman, the leader of the synagogue voices his displeasure and indignation. Essentially, his angry criticism drowns out her joyful praise: **"There are six days on which work ought to be done,"** he tells the crowds, **"come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."**

In other words, the leader protests because Jesus disrupts the regular Sabbath schedule of the synagogue. Jesus messes with tradition. Worse, he places a socially expendable, physically disabled, spiritually vulnerable woman at the *centre* of the tradition. Jesus allows the woman's need to interrupt his own sermon, and welcomes her praise song even though it upends the synagogue's order of service.

To be clear, though, the leader of the synagogue is not a “bad guy.” His intentions are not evil, and his concerns are not without merit. He cares about right worship. Right belief. Right practice. He cares about honouring the Sabbath, obeying God’s laws, and upholding the faith-filled traditions of his spiritual community. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these goals.

But what the leader misses is the heart of the Sabbath, the heart of God’s law, the heart of the tradition. What the leader misses is **compassion**. The kind of compassion that trumps legalism every single time. The kind of compassion that doesn’t cling to orthodoxy simply for orthodoxy’s sake. The kind of compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, the broken spirit – **before** it sees the broken commandment.

This story – like so many Gospel stories – illustrates a basic truth about God’s inbreaking kingdom: the kingdom doesn’t care about our timing, or our sense of etiquette, or our obsession with propriety and decorum. The kingdom cares about love. It cares about love **NOW**.

Many of us (like the woman in the story) know what it’s like to be bound by circumstances that diminish, distort, and wound us – physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Some of us know (or have known) what it’s like to lose agency, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own. Some in our churches and in our communities are still “bent over,” because they have not experienced the Church as a place where all are seen, cherished, called, invited, unbound, and released to praise God with our unique stories of healing.

How, given these realities, can we leave room for Jesus to show up and surprise us? How can we make sure we’re not so entrenched in our theological, liturgical, cultural, or political points of view that we fear and resist the new? The unorthodox? The unconventional? How can we make sure that our religious practices and preferences don’t get in the way of God’s tender, compassionate “unbending?”

Jesus responds to the leader of the synagogue by calling the healed woman “a daughter of Abraham.” For us – each person we encounter is a loved child of God – so maybe that phrase can stick with us. And remember that it’s true for you too – you are a loved child of God.

Conclusion

In a few moments of quiet, as I end this talk, I invite you to look at the passage again and ask God to speak to you ‘where you are’ within it.

- Are you in some way akin to the woman as she is present and Jesus calls to her?
- Are you in some way akin to the leader of the synagogue and need God to fill you with compassion?
- Are you in some way akin to Jesus himself – ready to go out and bring God’s compassion and healing to people in our community?

Ask God to speak to you and then respond to God.

Adapted from <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2316-she-stood-up-straight> & [Explore and respond \(rootsontheweb.com\)](https://www.rootsontheweb.com)