

STAND UP STRAIGHT

Luke 13:10-17

The war in Ukraine has been going on for almost six months by now. This is an eternity in the age of social media and instant internet access. It has been going on for “so long” that it doesn’t even make headlines anymore. If we were still to read actual newspapers, this war would definitely show up “below the fold.” The same is true for the COVID pandemic, which is in its third year. Its initial urgency is now being replaced by monkeypox and polio rearing its ugly head once again. And the countless number of people seriously affected by climate disasters and hunger crises aren’t even on our radar screens quite yet.

The global scale of suffering and the need for healing are overwhelming these days and the 24/7 media onslaught about world-wide tragedies has been relentless. Many of us are confronted with what psychologists, therapists and social scientists have termed “psychic numbing,” “compassion fatigue,”

and “burn out.” It is simply too much for us to take it all in and we shut down in order not to go crazy or walk around in a cloud of sadness all the time.

But I have a hunch, it's always been that way. Suffering in Jesus's time was as ubiquitous as the need for daily bread. That is why Jesus tells us a story in Luke's gospel about one individual, and one individual only. He personalizes the infirmity of one woman who had been waiting for healing for 18 years. That's a long time to wait when you are in pain. When he sees her, when he sees how she is doubled over in convulsions, he heals her. More accurately, he *liberates* her, unbinds her from her suffering and sets her free. “Just then, a woman appeared with a spirit that had rendered her infirm for 18 years. She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

While it is not difficult to look away from the plight of unknown millions, it is almost impossible to turn away from one person in pain who knocks on our door asking for help. “If I look at the mass [of people] I will never act. If I look at the one, I will,” Mother Theresa famously commented. And when we read or hear this story in Luke’s gospel, it is also nearly impossible not to recognize that tomorrow, maybe even today, we too might be the ones in need of healing. Denying this reality of our human condition is just as much a coping mechanism as is psychic numbing, compassion fatigue, or burn-out. This is not a moral evaluation of our situation. It is simply an acknowledgment of our human predicament.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that Jesus does not “cure” this woman, as the leader of the synagogue asserts who gets in a huff because Jesus liberates the infirm woman from her suffering on the Sabbath. It is important, because “curing” is work that is not permitted on the Sabbath. But Jesus does not take the bait. He does not need a “religious ticket” for violating a

commandment because he does not intervene therapeutically. Rather, he unbinds the infirm woman, liberates her, and restores her to life. “You hypocrites,” Jesus chides the leader of the synagogue and his supporters. “Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, who is a daughter of Abraham whom the adversary bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” In other words, Jesus affirms that life, any life which is created by God, is worthy of being liberated and set free to live as God created this life to be lived. There are no religious rules or regulations around any of this, no matter what any synagogue leaders or church leaders have to say.

This “setting free” is not a miracle. Any of us can do it. We can unbind and liberate others, liberate any created life—human or otherwise. We can start with one, then another, and another. All we need to do is to give another room to breathe and to be. I am

sure it is not hard for us to think of one person in our circle of influence who needs to be set free from suffering. It does not have to be someone who suffers physically. Our mental anguish, our emotional turmoil or spiritual struggles can be just as debilitating as a cancer diagnosis or rheumatoid arthritis. We are all in need of healing on every level of what makes and keeps human life human. No one is exempt from this.

Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to stand up straight when you are hurting, both literally and figuratively speaking? We are stooped over when we are not feeling well physically, our backs are hunched over, we shuffle along, and our eyes are fixed on the ground before us. When we are hurting emotionally, mentally or spiritually, we often lose the twinkle in our eyes, there is no spring in our step and no spark in our actions. Jesus helps us relate in Luke's gospel to this universal condition by staying with the woman who "was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." Just as he sees her and liberates her, he also sees you

and me in our infirmities. And all Jesus wants to do is liberate us and unbind us from whatever it is that weighs us down.

Have you also noticed what happens when we are able to stand up straight? Our backs ache less, our muscles stretch, we can breathe easier as our lungs inflate better, and our field of vision expands as we lift our heads and our hearts. The twinkle in our eyes returns, we feel energized and are ready to tackle what lies ahead, and our outlook on life in general improves. However, it is necessary to circle back here to the fact that Jesus does not “cure” the ailing woman but liberates and unbinds her. This is so very important because we can be healed even when we are facing a terminal diagnosis or when we walk through the dark valley of mental illness.

When Jesus sets the unnamed woman free, Jesus returns her to her community. She is not ostracized anymore but a full member of her community once more. Often, when we struggle with

something which cannot be “cured,” we, too, may be alienated from our support system, our family and our friends. And our healing, our liberation comes when someone sees us in our suffering and attends to us, when someone helps us to stand up straight once more, whether literally or metaphorically speaking.

The writer of Luke’s gospel has Jesus tell this story to show us how we can participate in the divine call of restoring all people, indeed all creation, to a life of healing and wholeness that God intended for everyone. One person at a time, one animal at a time, one plant at a time. This is holy work. Work which can be performed on any day of the week, regardless of the boundaries some may want to put around it. And asking someone to unbind us and liberate us from our own infirmities—physical, mental, emotional or spiritual—might just be a good way to get started.

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