

P13C – **BENT OUT OF SHAPE** – Luke 13:10-17 (and Jeremiah 1:4-10)

“ A SPIRIT had crippled her”; she was a BENT person

Thank you, Thea and Tom. In the dialogue just enacted, I trust all of you noticed how at first, it is the woman who stares at the ground with questions. She is in pain because no one sees her, no one meets her eye to eye. Later, it is the leader of the synagogue, the Pharisee who is the one staring at the ground, his head bent downward, sullen, perhaps pondering his whole life's direction. The formerly-crippled and downcast woman? Now, she's the upright one, looking to the heavens in gratitude.

Clearly we all, in one way or another, get bent out of shape; we all are, bent people.

I don't mean to talk glibly about this. It's far too easy, for instance, for those of us not physically handicapped to inadequately empathize with those among us who are. But I also want to suggest that in another very real sense, each of us have handicaps. All of us certainly have weaknesses of one kind or another. And the commonality we share is that of being bent people, limited in our abilities. Over the long haul, the limits we mortals share in common are good news, not bad. This morning, as always, I pray I'll be able to witness to this good news.

If you haven't already, when you get home, you may want to reflect on today's recommended Old Testament text too: it is Jeremiah 1:4-10, the story of the young boy Jeremiah. When called by God to become a prophet, he made excuses, saying “But Lord, I am only a boy.” And God says to the youngster, “Do not say you are only a child”. Do not say you are only a bent-over woman either! Clearly the message of scripture to all who feel inadequate, small, spiritually bent over in any way, is to stand tall, to not make self-deprecating excuses. God doesn't accept our self-deprecating excuses. We are all to be fully and proudly the children of God we're meant to be. We are nothing less than seen, noticed, loved, and fully-honored, destined for good things, every last one of us!

We are told that the woman in today's story had been bent over by a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. All her life she had been living in “a posture of forced humility”. “Every time she held her head up and tried to be somebody, the people around her – both male and female – did all they could to deflate and diminish her (all over) again.” (*from a web conversation site*)

History is rife with horrific examples of such deflatings and diminishments. War becomes the excuse for forcing people into postures of humiliation and physical agony prisoners of war are literally forced into spaces too small for their bodies to ever be upright again. There were the so-called tiger cages – remember, in Vietnam, and more recently, similar places of torturous confinement at Abu Grabe and Guantanamo.

During the Nazi era, gay people were called bent ones. A famous play by Martin Sherman eventually became a movie by that same title: *Bent*. It tells of how gay people were sent to concentration camps, and along with Jews and gypsies and other despised groups, were, during the holocaust, brutally tortured and killed.

So many women in earlier days – even in this country – even my own mother – in the name of what was considered stylish, had their feet bound up in pointy shoes far too confining to adequately contain their feet. Women’s feet in much of the world are still today, bent out of their normal shape to fit a culturally-defined definition of ‘shapely’.

Today’s gospel story says the woman Jesus healed had been bent over for 18 years. A group of wives and mothers got asked what in their own experience might cause a woman to be bent over that long. They were quick to respond: “Her children!” one said. “Eighteen years is the minimum sentence parenthood brings.” Another woman spoke up and said, “Don’t forget her husband. She was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks for thirty years.” Still another said, “Maybe she was tired of working like a slave for minimum wage, or even tired of working like a slave at home for no wages at all.”

There are so many ways we get bent over. Certainly too much work is one of these – always trying to please the man, to make the grade, to meet the deadline. Today, Sabbath-keeping is no longer a societally – imposed rule. Since we’re such workaholics, maybe we’d be better off if it still was! If ever a society needed regular Sabbath rest, it’s ours. Thank God that at least Jesus was not a workaholic! He regularly withdrew from the crowds and from healing and teaching in order to get rested and refreshed enough to go back into the fray. He did not come to abolish the Sabbath! In today’s world where work is the primary drug of choice, it’s all the more important that we keep Sabbath too.

But people aren’t supposed to have to go through all kinds of hoops in order to keep the Sabbath either. Keep it in mind that some of the schools of famous rabbis in Jesus’ day discussed and disagreed about the question whether even an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath could be eaten! Rule-keeping for its own sake was never Jesus’ thing. Clearly some rules are meant to be broken – or, should I say, bent? People weren’t created to keep the Sabbath, the Sabbath was designed to keep the people! To keep bent people from getting way too bent out of shape, out of balance, out of sync.

That’s why when they asked Rosa Parks, why she wouldn’t get out of her seat on that Montgomery, Alabama bus, she replied, in effect, “Because I don’t think I should have to! And...Because Jesus healed on the Sabbath!” In interpreting best ways to keep the Sabbath, you see, Jesus was willing to bend or to break rules. Like Rosa Parks. Like the increasingly large number of men and women in the military today who are refusing to go back to Iraq. Why? Because they shouldn’t have to! Because Jesus healed on the Sabbath! And because those in charge have from the get-go promulgated an immoral, insane, dead wrong war which should not continue one day longer.

Something else to be noticed in today’s gospel story is this: the angry Pharisee does not approach Jesus directly with his complaint about his Sabbath rule-breaking. Rather, he talks about it to everyone else; he’s all bent out of shape and seeking reinforcement; so he addressed his complaint to the wider crowd. It’s a bad habit still quite common today. Some call it gossip. Some call it ‘triangulating.’ It might happen when someone is upset with the pastor, or with someone else, but they don’t go to the one they’re really upset with. They ‘consult’ with everybody but the person they’re upset with. Jesus discourages this. Before you get bent out of

shape about something that's bugging you, address the concern honestly, with the person it most directly involves. You may end up being surprised as to how promptly and constructively the problem can be solved.

And to all of you who are caregivers of other bent mortal beings: I can't help thinking of the words of one of the songs, # 178 in our hymnal: "We have the strength to lift and bear a friend's immobile weight, the strength to watch and nurse and care through hours long and late, because we trust in ways unknown, the springs of health are stirred, and thus the mind, the flesh and bone receive Christ's healing word. ...Though we may lack Christ's gift to heal, this task is surely ours: To bring to Christ the lost who feel their need of gracious powers."

There's a difference between getting cured and being healed, you know. Sometimes we bent ones who come to church don't get a cure as such. But every bent person can be healed and made spiritually whole.

It is the vocation of Christ's body, the church, to bring together the lost and the broken, the bent and the hurting ones who "feel their need of gracious powers". "If this is not a place where tears are understood, where can I go to cry?" sings Ken Medema. "If this is not a place where my spirit can take wing, where can I go to fly? If this is not a place where my questions can be asked where shall I go to speak? If this is not a place where tears are understood, where shall I go, where shall I go, to fly?"

The Asian Christian woman Yeow Choo Lak put it this way: "I have been tiger caged, put down, denied space to breathe and grow. In the name of beauty – look at my feet now, bound to make them small – all because men wished it so. ... (But) Jesus inspires us to hold ourselves up. We are bent over no more. The spirit of infirmity is gone forever."

Do not say you are only a child. Do not say you are only a bent-over woman. All who feel inadequate, small, spiritually bent over in any way: stand tall; and don't make self-deprecating excuses. We can all be fully and proudly the children of God we're meant to be. We are nothing less than seen, noticed, loved, and fully-honored, destined for good things, every last one of us! Let it be. Amen.