

## **Bent in Half**

Luke 13:10-17

### **Slide: Me at Holden**

When first opening up the Gospel of Luke to see what would be the preaching passage for this Sunday, I actually laughed out loud. I laughed, not because this story from Luke is funny, but because it is so relatable to me. In fact, it's more relatable to me than ever before.

Just under three months ago, I had quite a fall and fractured my L4 vertebrae. Literally, I broke my back. It sounds so terrible when you put it that way - broke my back...but that's what it was. Fracturing my L4 somehow sounded less nasty to me. Now, they say it was a minor fracture, but when looking at those X-rays in the ER while barely being able to stand up in unbearable pain, it did not feel minor at all.

For almost 15 weeks, I wore a brace to keep my back straight and to protect the area from bending and twisting. Most of you remember that well since it's only been a few weeks now that I have had it off. And, for quite some time, I felt "bent in two" just like this woman in the Gospel. I had a desire to protect the area, but it was also obvious to people that I had done something serious to my back. People stared at me when I would walk into stores or in parks and public places. I had a better appreciation and compassion for those who live with noticeable disabilities.

But, it wasn't just physical. The very first thought that went into my head when I was on the ground in acute pain was: My summer is over and it was the last week of April. I thought I would have to cancel all my trips, that I wouldn't be able to walk very far and that the pain would last forever - and that was just the first 20 minutes of living with it. Of course, in my disappointment and pain, I had been bent in two in

other ways as well. I had also been “Crippled by a Spirit”; that is, the defeating language I heard in my brain, which although normal for any injury, was at first crippling: “What if I don’t heal from this?” “What if I can’t do what I used to before?” “Will I break my back again?” “Will this lead to nerve pain?”

And yet, looking back at it all, I can see the healing hand of God and the love of others, especially the love of those of this beloved faith community and of my husband and family. In one week, I was back at worship with a cane. In two weeks, I was driving again. In three, I was back to my usual walking schedule. The brace finally came off at Holden Village after I successfully hiked three hikes up and down those mountains and right at week 13.

### **Slide: Me last week**

And, this was last week – I climbed 60 flights worth of switchbacks at Devil’s Lake State

Park. Three months ago, I was like this bent over woman. Today, I can stand tall praising God. Of course, I’m blessed. I know many who never have resolved pain from an injury. How we respond to pain, however, can be very important.

### **Slide: Woman Bent in Half**

Whenever we encounter this nameless woman in Luke’s Gospel, we encounter more than a description of a person and witness a miracle. We encounter more than the shaming of those who would deny her healing on a day of worship because of some tradition, the twisting of a commandment to do no works on the Sabbath Day. We also encounter a woman who has had centuries of assumptions placed upon her, of our own images of what she looked like, how old she was, and what ailment she had.

Notice that this woman is known only as a woman who was “bent over”. Perhaps we have already conjured up in our minds

what that is. So, it's likely we encounter her often with a lot of assumptions. I know that was true of me when I first preached on this healing story about 19 years ago. Really, I have all my sermons. I looked! Turns out, I can learn a lot, too! Perhaps we may assume that she must have Osteoporosis, a disease that causes bone loss. We also may assume that this woman is older, perhaps elderly.

And yet, the Gospel does not tell us that she is either older or suffering any type of disease. This could be a younger woman. This could have been injury or Developmental Scoliosis. We simply don't know. But, what we do see is that she is identified by her ailment. She is called "Bent Over". The Greek word used here is actually closer to being translated as "Bent Double" or "Bent in Half".

It is the Sabbath Day - the holy day for Jews - and all the people are in the place of meeting for the Sabbath, the Synagogue.

Jesus is teaching there and while teaching, he notices this woman who is bent over. Envision this! He's teaching at a Synagogue, which means that all the men are in the front and the women are way in the back. That was traditional and expected in the ancient world. And, there has to be a packed crowd there given the popularity of Jesus. He had to be packing in the numbers in those pews. But, he notices her. He notices HER.

Imagine to be noticed like that and to be called up to the front while the teacher taught. Did people stare? Was she able to know she was singled out? Someone may have helped her perhaps? She was bent over. She couldn't look anyone in the eye without turning up her head. So, brought forward, Jesus sets her free from her captivity and she stands up straight and praises God.

But, that's not the end! The religious authorities are incensed. And, today, I almost don't even

care about that part. There will always be people angry when the vulnerable are protected. And, we have oodles of examples of hypocrisy and moralizing leaders in our world today. They are a dime a dozen. The part that is even more amazing to me is what Jesus then calls her. She is given a name – Daughter. Daughter of Abraham. Abraham was promised a nation and Jesus gives links her directly to it. She was a daughter of that promise. Jesus places value upon her. No wonder she stands tall.

And, perhaps it didn't escape your notice that this woman at first is also described as having been "Crippled by a Spirit" for 18 years. Something has kept her from being able to lift her head and to stand tall, to see more than the floor, to look someone in the eye. There is more than the physical ailment, disease or injury. She has been bound. The author of this story wants you to know that it's more than simple physical disease or injury.

To me, this is significant. It's also entirely relatable for our own lives. In what way today could we relate to being bound in this way, of being bent in half? What keeps you from standing upright today? What challenge, what obstacle, what internal struggle might we endure? As Eric mentioned in his sermon last week, we are so bombarded by the negative feed of divisive politics, which hamper our relationships, our lives, and even our church. Just wearing a mask brings about assumptions as well as not wearing one. We may struggle with similar assumptions of others, labels that people place upon you or you place on yourself such as:

- She's fat; or he's a workaholic; or she's abused; he's a drunk; she's a failure; she's an airhead; what a hick he is...

These labels can become so powerful that our identity becomes enmeshed with them, to the point of shame, bending us down. It can be hard to lift up out

of those trials and difficulties. Some days, hearing that language from others and in our own heads, we can come to believe they are true.

**Slide: Woman Praising God**

But, pushed to the back of the room, Jesus sees you. He notices you and calls you forward. He then calls you Son...Daughter. He calls you by name. You are a person of the promise. He reminds us all today that the family of God is not about shaming people or marginalizing those who struggle, but reminding us to come back to the center, to the source of all that is.

Dear Siblings, I don't know what it may be that you struggle with today. For some of you, I am aware as you trust to share your battles. I don't fully know what makes you bent in half. But, Jesus knows it. He sees you. He sees how you slip in without notice and he calls you to stand straight.

What a God we serve. This is a God who truly loves us even and especially when we can be so

unlovable sometimes. Let us continue to enter into trusting our creator, who dies for us and gives us life, whether we sit or stand with a walker, a cane, in a wheelchair, on two feet or in what keeps us bound, we stand up as the Children of Abraham that we are. Amen.