

“Bent”

Luke 13: 10 - 17

Makemie

January 27, 2008

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight & began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’

But the Lord answered him and said, ‘You hypocrites! 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, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?’ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; & the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

My mom tells a funny story about a young couple. The first time he cooked dinner for her, he used a family recipe for that Southern delicacy known as “Coca-Cola ham.” He brined the ham in Coke, rubbed it with herbs, cut off the ends and put it into the oven to roast. She loved it -- but had one question. “Why,” she asked, “do you cut off the ends of the ham before putting it into the oven?” After speculating about the added flavoring from a higher sugar concentration and the delicate balance between the sugar and the acid, he finally admitted that he didn’t know. He did it that way because his mother had done it that way.

When he took her home to meet his parents, she eagerly asked his mother the same question. “Why do you cut off the ends of the ham before putting it into the oven?” She didn’t know either. She did it that way because her mother had done it that way.

Finally, the young woman got a chance to meet her boyfriend’s grandmother. She couldn’t wait to pop the question. “I love your recipe for Coca-Cola ham,” she said. “But, I’m curious. Why did you cut off the ends of the ham before putting it into the oven?”

“Because,” the grandmother answered, “the ham was always too big for my pan.”

I suspect many of us have been caught, at one time or another, doing things the old way without knowing why. Most of us have had the experience of believing that something was important and then realizing that it really didn't matter, or worse, didn't even make any sense. Sometimes this realization comes quickly – like the now famous slap on the forehead reminding us that we could have had something else. But, sometimes it takes longer. Sometimes we continue to stand behind the old rules until we come face to face with the pain that they are causing someone else.

It seems like the rules that are the hardest to change are the ones that create differences between us – the ones that we use to distinguish what is right from what is wrong and who is in from who is out. They can be as simple as whether you wear seersucker after labor day or use middle names on your wedding invitations, and as sophisticated as whether your gender, skin color or sexual orientation is acceptable for your position.

This, I think, is what the healing of the bent woman is really about. Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath. The Sabbath is a holy time. It was not just a day of rest, or a day of prayer. It was not just a day to forget about checklists or to take an afternoon nap. It was a day to feast and to sing and to put on your best coat. It was a day on which married couples spent time with each other. It was a day to celebrate creation.

It makes sense that rules emerged for remembering and observing the Sabbath. We need rules to remember who we are. They tell us things we need to know – things that our mothers and fathers spent years learning. The Jews did things a particular way because they learned over time that doing things that way allowed them to grow in their relationship with God. They learned that if they stopped creating things for themselves that they remembered more clearly that it is really God who had created them. And, they weren't hard hearted. They understood the need for healing. But, they came to believe that, if healing can wait for a day, then it should.

The point of the story, then, is not that rules are bad, but that we often find ways of using even good rules to do bad things. On the

day that the community comes together to praise God, a misshapen woman is being isolated. She doesn't even have a name. She is known only by what's wrong with her – like a patient in the hospital known only as the “broken leg” in room 124, or the “collapsed lung” in room 312. She doesn't look like everybody else and can't do what everybody else is doing. Her back is so twisted by her burden that she can only see the ground in front of her.

Jesus has compassion on her. In healing her, he loosens the bonds of her isolation, and frees her to rejoin the community. She raises her eyes to heaven and praises God with everybody else. She takes her place in the circle as a daughter of Abraham, an inheritor of the blessing, a beneficiary of the Biblical promise. And, the people rejoice at her return. She is part of the body and they feel the added strength of her presence.

The leader of the synagogue objects, but I suspect that he is acting out of fear. He's pretending to be concerned about the sanctity of the rules, but I suspect that he's really afraid that some of the community's burdens must be born by someone outside of the circle and, if it's not her, then it might have to be him.

Here's the key, I think. Creation is ongoing. It is not just something that God did way back when. It is something that God is continuing to do now. And, to really celebrate the work of creation, we need to keep our eyes on that person barely visible just outside of the circle. They are easy to miss, easy to overlook. But, their faces will tell us if our rules are doing what they are supposed to do. Their faces will tell us if the rules that we hoped would keep us on the straight and narrow are in fact bending us out of shape. And, when we reach out to them, we will be saving ourselves.

Compassion is the guiding light of creation.

I read a story this week about a hard-nosed army nurse in charge of an Orthopedic Ward during the Viet Nam war. Most of that ward's patients were soldiers who had experienced traumatic amputations. She would not allow her nurses to cry. She believed that those in care needed strength from their nurses. There was no time for their own feelings to show. One day a very young soldier came in who was badly injured. There was no way he was going to make it. He was badly wounded, and he must have been in excruciating pain, but he never screamed or complained. He asked

the head nurse if he was going to die. She asked him if he thought he was going to die. He said that he did.

“Do you pray?” she asked him.

“I know now I lay me down to sleep.”

She said, “Good, that’ll work.”

He asked her to hold his hand while he prayed, and when he did that something inside the nurse snapped. She said that she would do better than that. She knew that she would catch flak for it, but she got onto the bed with him. She kissed him on the cheek and together they said, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” Then the soldier looked up at the nurse and said, “I love you, Momma, I love you.”

Then he died in her arms, peacefully and quietly, as if he really had just gone to sleep. She got off of his bed. With a scowl on her face she looked around daring anyone to give her a hard time. But all the corpsmen and nurses were breaking her rule. They were all crying silently with tears filling their eyes or rolling down their cheeks.

The nurse could not bear for the standard army telegram to be the only means of this boy's mother being told about her son's death. So she wrote a letter, and let the mother know that in his final moments he had been thinking about her. Mostly she wanted his mother to know that the boy had not died alone.

When he asked to hold her hand, something inside the nurse snapped. I think that something inside of us needs to snap or break or soften. We are in a battle, and people get wounded. Our faith is injured. Our love for God takes hits. Sometimes it seems our confidence in the power of the Spirit is almost shot-off. How important it is for us to be in community praying, loving, strengthening, healing, building up, and supporting. We are in this together. We are members of one another. We are a living church of the living God!

I hope we will all "snap." I hope we will all soften. I hope our hearts will break. I hope we will all put aside whatever is in the way and "love one another deeply from the heart."