**“Standing Up Straight”**Rev. Will Healy Sermon
August 25, 2019, Luke 13:10-17

         One of the things I’ve shared with you before—an observation that becomes apparent--right quick—as soon as we start reading the gospel--is that Jesus was a troublemaker--ever notice that?

 

Trouble just seemed to follow him.  And there were two places he managed to get in more trouble more often than anyplace else: at the dinner table and in church.  See, the good, well-behaved religious folk of his day had so many rules you couldn’t keep track—rules for what to wear--what to eat--when to work; rules for what not to wear--what not to eat--when not to work.  There was a rule for most every situation and circumstance under the sun… And while lots of those rules were good—were necessary for living in civility—in respectful community--the problem was that the rules had a way of becoming more important than people—the very people those rules were intended to serve.  And since Jesus came into the world to embody God’s love for people, why, he clashed with the rules-makers--the rules-keepers… Over and over again, Jesus was accused by religious leaders of breaking the rules—people who made it clear that Messiahs don’t touch lepers, or work on the Sabbath, or forgive adulterers, or hang out with “sinners.”  But Jesus made it every bit as clear: this Messiah does touch lepers, and forgive adulterers, and befriend people caught in the grip of sin, and break the Sabbath rules when there’s good cause to do so! And so this Messiah was dangerous--was a trouble-making Messiah--one you follow at your own peril. And guess what? He still is…

         One day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue—happened to be the Sabbath day.  And while he was teaching, this woman came hobbling into the room--all bent over double--a condition she’d been plagued with for 18 long years.  We don’t know what that might’ve been like—we’re not told, here, what the exact source of her condition was--only that it was spiritual in origin--Luke tells us it was a spirit that had crippled her all this time.  (Later on, Jesus says it was Satan who had bound her--18 years of that bondage!) We’re also not told whether she was asking for healing, only that for 18 long years she’s had to strain to see the sun, the moon, the stars.  For 18 years she’s grown accustomed to looking down, or maybe slightly ahead, but never up—at least not without difficulty. 18 years of turning side-to-side just to see what others can see at a glance--until Jesus comes along…

You and I live in a world skeptical (at best) of healing and miracles.  Two years ago this month--when I was diagnosed with leukemia—I entered a whole new world—one I hadn’t known about—the world of medical science and technology--a world that has been so instrumental in my journey toward healing…  And yet, it’s also a world where my prayers (and those of so many people for me) were sometimes gently dismissed by those caring for me—not always, but sometimes—and not in so many words--more like being met with a polite change of the subject…

The writer Frederick Buechner says those who choose not to believe in the miraculous healings of Jesus--or those healings done in his name—have any number of conclusions to reach for in explaining it all away—like:

* Unless you can provide medical evidence to prove a miracle has happened, well, you can assume healing has not happened…
* Or, if medical experts agree that a healing can’t be explained by way of present scientific knowledge, and something inexplicable has happened, then you can chalk it up to deficiencies in present scientific knowledge…  (In other words, if we don’t have an explanation yet, why, we’ll come up with one later, because it just can’t be God!)
* Or, if otherwise intelligent human beings are still convinced, despite all argument to the contrary, that it’s God who healed them, well, you can assume their sickness, like its cure, was psychological--just in their head…

And that, in a nutshell, is the mindset of our high-tech world--a mindset with no room for the voice of a compassionate Jesus who says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”

See, Jesus came into this world to take those bent over double and set them free—came to allow them—allow us--to stand up straight—to stand up tall—to stand up in the fullness of who we were created to be.  Because there are all kinds of things that can bend us over, right?--that can keep us from standing up straight… Some of us have gotten bent over by an inability to forgive (or to be forgiven). There’s been a wounding in our lives--either something done to us, or something we did to somebody else--and the only path to healing is for that wound to be forgiven--but forgiveness has been withheld (or maybe still is being withheld…).  And slowly--but surely--the human spirit gets bent over by that withholding—bent over to the point where we can only look down, not up…

Maybe that…  Or maybe it’s shame that’s bound us--maybe somewhere along the line—at some point of great vulnerability in your life, let’s say--you needed a message affirming your basic value as a human being, but that message was withheld--and instead, you were told--either explicitly or through some kind of shunning--that you weren’t good enough to get in on that message.  See, shame is the belief or mindset that something’s wrong with us. It’s not just feeling bad about our behavior (what guilt is); rather, it’s the conviction that we are somehow deficient, defective, of no worth as a human being—that we’re damaged goods... And when that’s the message we’ve been given, then we start doing this “inner translation” thing--somebody says, “I don’t agree with you.”  What does that mean? Well, it means that person has a perspective, and you have a perspective, and they are not the same perspective. Period. That’s all it means! But when you’ve been damaged by shame, then having somebody disagree with you comes to mean: “Well, I must be stupid for thinking the way I do.” Or making a mistake translates: “I am less of a person.” Or spilling your milk means: “I’m a klutz.”  Or somebody else having something positive happen to them--a job upgrade, a new car, a new romance--means: “Well, God must not love me as much as he loves them.” And on and on it goes… My kids misbehaving translates: “I’m a lousy parent.” My inability to live up to some “Christian formula” means: “I’m a defective Christian.” My spouse feels sad--must mean: “I’m a miserable husband/wife.” And I don’t need to go on--that’s too many examples already!  Shame cripples the human spirit, bends it over double--means all we can see is down, not up…

Bent over by the absence of forgiveness—bent over by shame—or maybe you’ve been bent over by injustice, or racism, or economic insecurity, or some form of abuse… Is something in that list your deal?  This past week marked the national observance of the 400 year anniversary of the arrival of human slaves in this country--a shameful legacy of exploitation, bondage and evil not taught in the history books I grew up with.  We learned about the Mayflower--not the White Lion and the Treasurer--slave ships that kidnapped Africans. And that defining moment on the shores of the Chesapeake in southern Virginia, codified inequality--in both law and custom--resulting in 400 years of injustice--it’s in our DNA as a nation--that which continues to bend oppressed people over (and over and over again).

So, are you bent over, these days?  Maybe for so long you don’t even recognize being bent over any more, having become so used to looking down?  I can’t help but think that Jesus’ accusers, here, are very bit as bent over as the bent over woman in the story--so glued to their legalism and rules-keeping that they can’t stand up straight and see a miracle--right in front of their eyes!

There’s a story I’ve told before--one I find so powerful that it bears repeating.  It was the time our daughter, Nina, went to Los Angeles to visit her college roommate, Ashley--had a summer social work internship, Ashley did—at a homeless shelter—one run by a church.  Well, Saturday night, Ashley and Nina offered to babysit the daughter of the pastor’s family--meaning they took their little girl to the movies—***The Princess Diaries***-- being shown at this huge, elegant theater in Hollywood.  Tickets were $18--included tea after the show--actresses dressed up as movie princesses down through history—even had the actual dresses worn in ***The Princess Diaries***, there on display in the lobby--a grand piano serenading the little girls in their princess gowns--until just as the show was about to begin, the evening’s host stepped up and yelled, “Princesses!  Are you ready?” To which all the little girls squealed--“Oh, yes, yes, we’re ready!” And finally, the show began… Nina described it as the most bizarre movie-going experience of her life!

The next night--Sunday night--she and Ashley went to a street corner--also in Hollywood—among the most notorious corners for drug-dealing and prostitution in all Los Angeles.  Ashley, through her work at the shelter, had gotten to know many of the people working the streets there--in that seemingly god-forsaken place… So they walked around--asking people if they could pray for them before their night of sadness and exploitation got underway.  And Nina told of a young male prostitute she met--about to step into that frightening world all over again—this mere child--who said that yes, he would love to have her pray for him. And so my daughter stood and held him--this beloved child of God—and prayed God’s love into and over and around him…  And as she told me that story, Nina said, “Here was a person I would never have thought I could touch, let alone come near, but there I was holding him--by the grace of God--and praying for him…”

Two moments--same city--just hours and blocks apart—a princess and a prostitute--almost like being on two different planets…  And I don’t get that--how such disparity can exist… But people get bent over! For all kinds of reasons--in all kinds of ways--people get bent over.  And Jesus came into this world to deliver people from what has bent and bound them--came to invite them to stand up straight. And guess what? He calls us to join him—to join him in loving people into that freedom…

Luke tells us--that despite the opposition to come--despite those who would try and rain on this sacred moment—he tells us Jesus healed this woman.  She didn’t even ask for it--that’s how bent over she was--but his heart was moved—moved to see her set free. And we read that immediately she stood up--for the first time in eighteen years--she stood up straight—stood and praised Almighty God.  Oh, my!

 **Prayer**: Worship, and the hearing of God’s word, can have this way of holding a mirror up to us—we get to see ourselves in a way we haven’t been able to see ourselves before…