

{ SEQ CHAPTER \h \r 1}Bent Over Double

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Luke 13:10-17

There was a man in my last church named Mike who has Post Polio Syndrome. Sometimes he will wake up in the morning to discover
that he has lost the function of another muscle,
and he has to retrain his body to make up for that muscle.
That means that one day you will see him walking unassisted,
though with a distinct limp or an awkward gait.
The next time you see him, he could be using a cane or forearm crutches
or maybe even be in a wheelchair.

I asked him once about his experiences with his disability,
and how others relate to him because of it.
He told me that he will do anything to avoid using the wheelchair.
He said that people will come up behind him and grab the handles of his chair
and shake it in what they think is a fun greeting,
but which feels to him like a huge invasion of his personal space.
People don't always sit or kneel but instead will talk down to him,
both physically and intellectually,
as if his mind is as weak as his legs.
But the worst, he said, is when people carry on a conversation over him,
as if—in his words—he is little more than a dog at their feet.
When he used to work in academia, he said that when he used his crutches,
he couldn't even get himself a cup of coffee at work.
But when he used the chair, he felt so easily dismissed.

I wonder if this is how the woman in our Bible story felt,
as people undoubtedly talked over her bent frame, rendering her invisible.
To me it is the most haunting of the miracle stories,
as she struggled through life with so many limitations.
Can you imagine 18 years of being bent over double,
seeing little but dusty roads and dirty feet?

Maybe if she craned her neck, she could see higher, could even see their faces.
But how long can you hold that pose?
I wonder how her neighbors related to her,
as her face became more and more withdrawn from sight.
I wonder if people more readily said cruel things
because they couldn't see her face.
I can see this woman so clearly in my mind that I feel like I have met her.
Maybe I have.

Contemporary scholars say she probably suffered from a disease called
Ankylosing Spondylitis,
which is a chronic inflammatory autoimmune disease
that often affects the spine.
It begins with a pain in the back that is relieved if the person bends over a little.
As the problem grows and the pain increases,
the person bends a little more
and a little more to try to relieve the pain.
Ultimately the bones fuse and the person is unable to stand upright.
But it happens one small pain at a time.

Sound familiar?
That is often how our burdens come to weigh us down—one small pain at a time.
[Add rocks into bag around my neck.]
Sure, for some of us, it *is* the one-time crisis or tragedy that forces us down—
the death, the illness, the attack.
But for others of us, it's not a single injury that leaves us bent over,
but a never-ending accumulation of pain.
Maybe it started when we were young.
A sharp insult from an angry parent—***stupid!***—and our shoulders curve.
An unkind word, a thoughtless comment—***wow have you gained weight!***—
and our back bends.
A betrayal of trust, a dashed dream,
and we struggle beneath the weight.
Over the years the burdens add up.
Sorrow, loss, and unshed tears. ***add rock***

Shame, anger, and unforgiven hurts. **add rock**
Fear, betrayal, and unanswered prayers. **add rock**
We keep bending forward, trying to ease the pain,
until we can no longer stand up straight.
But unlike the woman in our Gospel, some of us don't even know it.
We're so accustomed to being bent-over
that we've forgotten how it feels to stand up.
We're so used to seeing only dusty roads and dirty feet
that we've forgotten about blue skies and birds in flight.
We're so used to carrying our burdens
that we've forgotten what it means to be set free.

See what I mean? I know this "bent-over woman" as we call her.
I have known her as a woman and as a man and as a child and as a senior.
I have known her and him and them.
I just wish, for our sake, that the story in the Bible was a little more gradual.
I wish, for our sake, that Jesus has helped her a little bit, **(remove rocks)**
maybe 1/3 of the way straight,
but then went away for a few weeks.
I wish we met her again, and she was made 2/3 better, **(remove rocks)**
and finally after three visits, over time,
we saw that she was completely healed.
I wish the story was gradual
because our emotional and spiritual healings usually are.
Rarely do those things that weighed us down
get lifted off our backs—BAM—out of the blue. **(remove bag)**
Usually our healing is inch by inch, step by step,
kind word by fulfilled promise by forgiveness given or received.

Writer and poet Steve Garnaas-Holmes asks,

*What is bent over in you?
What is pushed over, put down,
made weak, or silenced?
What beauty is hidden,*

*what capacity stilled?
What in you is bound up,
distorted, facing downward?
How have you given up hope?
How have you been told that you can't?
That you deserve it?
That this is not the time for healing?*

*Let the bent over woman in you come forward.
Let Jesus lay a healing hand on her.
Don't expect instant change, but know this:
the spirit that distorts you
is not as strong as love.*

The spirit that distorts you is not as strong as love.

Of course, the so-called “bent-over woman” isn’t the only character in this story.

There is also the leader of the synagogue to consider.

Now, it would be easy for us to cast blame and make harsh judgments.

What kind of ogre was he, to deny her the healing she desperately needed?

Why would he say she should have come back another day,
when obviously getting around wasn’t exactly easy for her?

Wasn’t 18 years long enough to suffer?

But according to the law of the time, he was technically right.

“Keep in mind that the law—including the laws about the Sabbath—
was given to the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt.

You remember Egypt—where the Israelites were slaves
and worked whenever their masters commanded them,
likely never getting a day off.

And so when they received a command to rest—

to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies
and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer—
trust me, they heard this only as good news.”¹

¹ Ibid.

So the religious leader wasn't wrong. Not in theory, anyway. Just in application. You see, the bent-over woman couldn't stand up straight, but the religious leader couldn't bend. He was too rigid. He was so concerned about following the letter of the law that he missed the essence of the law. He was so concerned with what was prohibited that he neglected what was needed.

A pastor tells of what he describes as "an excruciating Deacons meeting." It happened over a decade ago, and I don't know what denomination this was in. I certainly hope attitudes have changed since then. But for this particular meeting, the proposal on the agenda was to have a baby shower for a 16 year-old girl who was pregnant. The start up costs for having a baby were daunting for her parents, which were already having trouble making ends meet. "To make the issue really complicated [from a church standpoint] her mother was the chair of the Board of Deacons. As the planning for the shower unfolded, the Deacons were divided by where to have the shower. One group felt strongly that the event should not take place at church. Their spoken rationale was that if it was in the building it was an official church event and then they would be obligated to hold a shower for everyone who was going to have a baby." The pastor added, "You can imagine the flood of pregnancies in a congregation where two-thirds of the women are over 50." Of course, the real issue was never spoken. "Some Deacons were concerned that having the shower at church would send 'the wrong message' to the young girls in the youth group." The pastor wrote, "As the debate ground on into the night I could see the chair of the board gradually shrinking away in shame.... I began to feel angry and said, 'This reminds me of the controversy of healing on the Sabbath. It's OK to heal, just make sure you don't do it during the church service

and get prior approval from the Board of Deacons and Church Council.
So in this case we need to decide if we want to publicly bless this family
or do it quietly somewhere else so no one gets upset.”²

Like I said, this story is ten years old and I hope outdated,
but we recognize the tendency, don't we?
The tendency, the temptation, of rigidity.
Some of us are bent-over double from the shame and pain of our lives.
Others of us are so ram-rod straight we can't even bend to say grace . . . or give it.

But both weigh us down.
Being judgmental is a weight.
Being too tied to laws is a burden.
Our rigidity to new ideas, to new expressions, weighs us down.

On a grander scale, how many times have the laws in our country
added additional weight to those already struggling beneath the load
of poverty, racism, and sexism?

Now in many states in the U.S., women who cannot afford to raise a child
are forced to take time off work and travel to distant states
in order to terminate an unplanned pregnancy.

Here in Northfield residents who cannot afford to fix up their trailers
may be forced to abandon their homes all together
due to new rules.

Now public schools in Texas are required to hang posters in prominent places
with the words “In God We Trust,”
thereby limiting the religious freedom of millions of teachers
and students.

“According to US News, From July 1, 2021 to March 31, 2022,
book bans occurred in 26 states and 86 districts....

These districts represent nearly 3,000 schools with a combined enrollment
of more than two million students.”³

² bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2010/08/luke-131017-following-the-unwritten-rules.html

³ <https://www.usnews.com/education/k12/articles/book-bans-what-to-know#:~:text=However%2C%20states%20and%20government%20officials,more%20than%20two%20million%20s>

The Idaho House of Representatives passed legislation to make it a crime punishable by life in prison for a parent to seek out gender-affirming health care for their transgender child.

A directive by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott ordered child welfare authorities to “conduct a prompt and thorough investigation” of any reported instances of minors undergoing “elective procedures for gender transitioning” as potential child abuse.

Multiple investigations are now underway into Texas families with transgender children, with the threat of decades in prison for anyone convicted of child abuse.⁴

When are we going to stop passing laws that limit freedom?
When are we going to relieve people from unnecessary burdens
so they can stand up straight and be who they were created to be?

Those who oppose us will say it is not the right day
to release people from burdens.

They will say it is not the right time to grant freedom.

But we know better, don't we? There is never a wrong day to free the oppressed.

Jesus said, “You are set free.”

You are set free from the definitions and expectations of others.

You are set free from shame and self-loathing.

You are set free from hatred and bigotry,

from the burden of always being right,

from the anger that controls you and the fear that inhibits you.

You are set free from the need to control others.

Jesus said, “You are set free.”

But here's the really great part about this story. The scripture tells us that “the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing.” That's what the New Revised Standard Version says.

tudents.

⁴ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/idaho-trans-health-care-youth-bill-rcna19287>

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But at least one scholar disagrees. He says:
“There is a perfectly good Greek word for ‘doing’ but Luke does not use it.”
The best translation isn’t that the people rejoiced
at the wonderful things Jesus was doing,
but at “all the glorious things coming into being from him.”
Jesus wasn’t just doing glorious things. He was creating them.
He was creating a world where the wounded are healed,
where those who are bent may stand tall,
where those who are neglected will be called into community
as daughters and sons of Abraham.
He also was creating a world where we can learn to bend without breaking,
learn to offer grace without fear.
And that’s a world we all can live in.

Please join me in the unison prayer of response written in your bulletin.