

# How To Love Hurting People

Sermon, August 25, 2019

Texts: Luke 13:10-17 (Hebrews 12:18-29)

The more observant among you may have noticed the nuanced potential double entendre of the sermon title; it was inspired by a bulletin blooper I once saw about a pulpit supply pastor: *"Please welcome Pastor Don, he is a dynamic individual who loves hurting people."* I'm sure they meant Pastor Don loves people who are hurting, not that Dynamic Don enjoys hurting (*i.e., inflicting pain on*) people ... but then again, there are some church leaders who make you wonder! Like the synagogue ruler in our Gospel reading this morning ... Jesus loved a hurting person; He just healed a woman of a crippling disease she had borne over eighteen years, and Luke tells us, *"Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people (including this woman), 'There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.'" What a guy! Like, "You 'bad dog' ... take care of that elsewhere; don't expect to get anything straightened out here! Don't come to church expecting to be healed!"* Now, I embellish ... I'm sure this synagogue leader was a good man, a man well respected by the community, an attentively religious man ... or else he would not have been a synagogue leader in the first place. But it's fairly clear he's missing the point!

The story we just read: One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. A woman was there who was severely disabled. Her body was all bent over, so bent that she almost resembled a walking question mark. We do not know her name, nor do we know much about her background, other than she has been plagued by this condition for eighteen years. Eighteen years! (*You just saw during the Time With the Children how I had the children stand up straight and then reach down to touch their toes ... and I then told them to hold that position for the next eighteen years! As some of them haven't started their school years yet, that would mean they'd have to stay like that until they finished graduate school! Well, that's what this woman had endured*). We can't help but hurt for her; she was so terribly disabled. But there is one big reason we should also admire her. Why? Because she did not allow her physical condition to keep her from coming to worship! Even with her pronounced deformity she was there, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath. That's admirable! She had been this way for eighteen years all bent over, unable to rise up; I'm sure the pain was sometimes severe and I'm sure it wasn't easy going out in public. Yet, her weekly habit was to be in the house of worship. It was the Sabbath, so it was time to go to synagogue. It was what she did every week, no matter what.

By contrast, all of us know people who will miss church if they have so much as a headache (*in other congregations, of course!*). Some will miss worship if there is a threat of rain or snow. Some will miss worship if there is a "threat" of sunshine, for there are so many other things you can do when the weather is nice! (*In my 35 years of ministry I've come to the conclusion that the perfect day for worship is cool and somewhat overcast*). But here was this woman where she was wants to on the Sabbath: In worship. And because she was there, she received a very special blessing from Jesus. When Jesus told her to step forward, she obeyed, and as He touched her, this terrible burden was lifted from her. Says Luke, *"Immediately she straightened up and praised God."* Because she was there, Jesus touched her and spoke to her and literally straightened out her life! Her bent-over, question mark of a body was made into an upright exclamation point of joyful praise and exuberance! Things happen ... *good things, redemptive things, eternal things ...* when we make it a priority to be in worship.

We don't know the cause of this woman's malady ... a spinal injury, an extreme case of osteoporosis, Parkinson's. Or, perhaps it was more than just physical. It's interesting that Luke notes *"... a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit ...."* Maybe Luke, who was a physician, is intimating the cause of this woman's condition may be more than merely physical. In Psalm 38:6-8, David writes, *"I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning. My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart."* When you read the rest of that Psalm, it is clear David attributes much of why he is bowed down to his own guilt. He did have a lot to feel guilty about, but that's another sermon. Suffice it to say for now, David's spiritual condition obviously had an oppressive effect on his health; he was "brought low" by the weight of his guilt.

Psychological and/or emotional issues can cause incredible physical pain, and have no doubt about it, the pain is excruciatingly real ... psychological issues, mental distress, emotional turmoil can indeed bow us down emotionally and even physically. You can sometimes see it in the person's posture. Maybe not as badly as this woman in Luke, of course, but we can almost see the shoulders slump and the back bend. We see such a person who is obviously deeply troubled, and we say, *"He seems to be carrying the*

*weight of the world on his shoulders.*" Worries, difficulties, low self esteem all can cause a person to shrink into himself or herself. Just as a bit of an aside, we know our mood can affect our posture, but it is also true our posture can affect our mood. Slumping shoulders and slumping spirits often go hand in hand. That's why we parents often tell our children, *"Throw your shoulders back. Hold your head high. Stand tall and straight!" (and, "While you're at it, pull up your pants!")*. How we carry ourselves really can influence our mood, our attitude, our appearance and our well being.

The reality is that all kinds of life burdens can cause us to be emotionally bent or bowed down: The weight of humiliation and shame, the weight of grief, the weight of disease, the weight of overwhelming financial worries ... the weight of any kind of worry for that matter ... the weight of "what if" and "why did I?", the weight of loss and longing, the weight of sin and failure. Such weight can bear us down and bend us over mentally, emotionally and physically, and have a crippling effect on our lives.

A reporter once asked George Bernard Shaw, *"If you could live your life over and be anybody you've known, or any person from history, who would you choose to be?"* The renowned playwright and author replied, *"I would choose to be the man George Bernard Shaw could have been and never was."* Now, he was an accomplished individual; in fact, he was the only man in history to win both the Nobel Prize for Literature and an Oscar. But even he was burdened by the weight of "what if" and "why did I?", he recognized he could have been more, accomplished more, enjoyed life more. I like Mr. Shaw's reply. When I first heard that little anecdote, I asked myself the same question: If I could live my life over, if I could be "reincarnated" and be anybody I've known, any person from history, who would I choose to be? I really would like to be reincarnated as Steve Clark (*me, not my son*), and the next time around I would do some things in my life over and do them RIGHT! Like any of us here, there are a number of things in my life I would love to have the opportunity for a "do-over." But again, I digress.

Back to our bent over woman. Now I know you believe in regular attendance at worship or you wouldn't be here today. In fact, summer attendance has been remarkable this year; all of you have made it a priority to be here week after week. Missing worship can really be serious business. You just never know how you might be blessed; for that matter, you just never know how you might be a blessing to others! You just might have the opportunity to be the presence of Jesus and elevate the spirit of some burdened person who has come to this sanctuary seeking relief.

There were certainly many Sabbath days this woman faithfully came to worship and nothing got straightened out, many Sabbath days she brought her crippled, question-mark shaped body along with her question-filled mind, her heavy heart, her fears and worries to worship. Note: She did NOT wait until she got everything in her life straightened out before she came to worship! She came to worship, and on this particular Sabbath Jesus straightened everything out for her! Jesus can do that! If there is some burden weighing you down, come to worship and give it to Jesus. He is able to look at us and see just what we need, where we need straightening ... physically straightened, as the woman in the story; spiritually straightened, if we are heading astray; perhaps emotionally, or psychologically straightened. There may be some Sunday ... not every Sunday, but one particular day ... when Jesus just touches you in a personal way, when things come together, and His Spirit helps you get things straightened out.

In the little time I have remaining I want to come back to that other character in the story who seems plagued by a different kind of crippling spirit, a critical spirit of legalism and condemnation. Our crabby synagogue leader. Again, I'm sure he was a good man, a man well respected by the community, an attentively religious man ... or else he would not have been a synagogue leader in the first place. But it's fairly clear he missed the point ... all the rules and good guidelines of our faith are meant to elevate, not put down. They are meant to set spirits free, not bind them up. They are meant to help us love hurting people, not to help us hurt people. They are meant to help us help them, to help all of us, get lovingly **straightened out**.

Jesus had done a literally uplifting work of grace, and all this man can do is put down, criticize. The church is a place where people still come today for healing and acceptance, to have their burdens lifted, to get their lives straight, to come to find help and relief for their burdened hearts. I'd like to ask what might be a rhetorical question, for knowing so many of you as well as I do, I already know the answer: Will people who walk through these doors find the loving, elevating, healing presence of the spirit of Jesus, or will they find the condemning, critical, carping spirit of this misguided synagogue leader? Will they discover here a spirit that elevates or a spirit that cripples?

Let's make certain we continue to be a church community that always seeks to elevate, to heal, to uplift ... a family that loves hurting people with the uplifting love and grace of Jesus Christ.