

SOMEONE WHO LOVES HURTING PEOPLE

Sermon, August 21, 2022

Text: Luke 13:10-17

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. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus was someone who loved a hurting person, while the synagogue leader appears to be someone who "loves hurting people." Jesus just lovingly healed a woman of a crippling disease she had borne over eighteen years, then 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.'" I can imagine him adding "And don't come to church on the Sabbath expecting to be healed and/or to have anything straightened out!"* What a guy! There is something really wrong with someone who can witness something like this, a life transforming and freeing encounter, and the first thing out of his mouth is the equivalent of, *"Bad dog! This isn't right."* (*I thought of entitling this sermon "Just Who Is Bent Out of Shape Here?"*) Now, 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! (*As one commentator on this passage wrote: "There is no prescription in our faith against doing good ... the religion that would honor God by forbidding virtue is self-condemned."*)

As 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! When I last preached on this passage three years ago, during the Time With the Children 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 hadn't started their school years yet, that would mean they would have had 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 faithfully be in the house of worship. It was the Sabbath, so it was time to go to synagogue.

In preparing for the July 31 dedicatory harpsichord recital in memory of David and Nancy Dickerman, I was looking over past notes and files regarding the Dickermans and noted it was three years ago I last preached on this passage from Luke; it was the assigned lectionary text for August 25, 2019. That was the Sunday after Dave was moved to Florida to be cared for by his nurse daughter-in-law and his son and grandchildren. Again, the assigned lectionary text that day was the same as today's, about this woman who would not allow her physical condition to keep her from coming to worship if it were at all possible for her to be there! That's admirable, and that was Dave! Many of you remember Dave Dickerman's Parkinson's afflicting him in this manner; he, too, was bent over, but Sunday after Sunday he'd be in worship, even managing to sing with the choir. Like this woman, whose weekly habit was to be in the house of worship. I later learned Dave was able to be in worship in Pensacola, Florida that same Sunday when this was the lectionary text for the day (*I don't know if the church there followed the lectionary, though*).

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 38 years of ministry I've come to the conclusion that the perfect day for worship is cool and somewhat overcast*). Nowadays people even miss church because of fear someone might breathe on them. But here was this woman making every effort to be where she wants to be 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! And maybe I'm reading too much into this event, but I believe 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 or Parkinson's, or a condition of what is called Ankylosing Spondylitis (*or AS, a malady in which the spinal vertebrae fuse together in a permanent curvature*). 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 "bowed down and 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. The weight of humiliation, shame, the weight of grief, the weight of disease, or overwhelming financial worries, the weight of regret, the weight of failure. Such weight can bear us down and have a crippling effect on our lives. Remember Jesus' words from Matthew 11:28 -- *"Come unto Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* Or, to express it more colloquially, *"I'll help you get straightened out."*

Back to our bent over woman. Now I know many of you believe in regular and personal attendance at worship or you wouldn't be here today. In fact, summer attendance has been very good this year; several of you have made it a priority to be here week after week after week. Missing worship can really be serious business. You just never know how you might be blessed when you are here; 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 to another and elevate the spirit of that 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. Another observation to 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. There may be some Sunday ... not every Sunday, but one particular day ... when Jesus just touches you in a personal way, when He lifts a burden, and/or He 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 people free, not burden them further. 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 guy can do is criticize and put down. The church is a place where people still come today for healing and acceptance, to have their burdens lifted, to get their lives straightened out, to come and find help and relief for their heavy hearts. This church wants people who walk through these doors to find the loving, uplifting, healing presence of the spirit of Jesus, not the condemning, critical, picky spirit of this misguided synagogue leader.

Let's continue to be a church community that always seeks to elevate, to heal, to help in the name of Jesus ... let us be people who love hurting people with the uplifting love and grace of Jesus Christ.