

STANDING FREE

WOMEN AND THE WORD
MARCH 17, 1993

LUKE 13:10-17

It's curious that this passage does not show up in our lectionary readings, an omission which is most unfortunate. We have much to learn from the woman who was weighed down. And we have much to learn from Jesus' power and authority to heal.

Luke 13:10-17

"Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath." It was the holy day of rest. And the faithful had gathered to hear the wisdom of Jesus. I suppose many came that day simply because it was the sabbath and going to the synagogue was the thing to do - not expecting much - just simply there for the occasion.

"A woman showed up who for eighteen years had been afflicted by a spirit." For eighteen years she was burdened -- for 18 years she was weighed down -- for 18 years she was shackled. How could she bear it for so long? What is it like to carry with you the weight of pain? Of pressures? Of oppression? Of course, during 18 years its very familiarity may even give comfort. That's the seduction of oppression. "Hello darkness my old friend." "Oh,

yes, here come the familiar waves of depression, I know how that feels."

"She was bent over and unable to straighten up even a little." Her burden, that which weighed her down, was relentless. There was no relief. She was bent over and unable to straighten up even a little.

"When Jesus noticed her, he called her over. . . ." What kind of person was she. Had she hidden her gifts . . . Afraid of the possibilities which welled up within her? What had this burden done to her? Honed her with inner strength? Embittered her? Driven her crazy? Had it sapped her energy? What does such a burden do to a person? You know them, of course, these people who are weighed down. When Jesus noticed her, he called her over. Sometimes its easier not to be noticed. Sometimes its easier just to carry the burden year after year - five, ten, eighteen, twenty years, a lifetime of suffering. When Jesus noticed her, he called her over. This woman who has suffered is now. . . Noticed . . . By the teacher.

"And [Jesus] said, 'woman you are freed from your affliction.'" A new possibility is offered. You do not have to live with this burden -- ever. You do not have to live as a victim of the pain that binds you and holds you down. Something more is offered to you.

"He laid hands on her, and immediately she stood straight up and began to praise God." Release, freedom, new possibilities, liberation, hope restored.

When the woman was freed of her burden and stood straight, the leader of the synagogue became indignant. The law had been broken.

When healing happens, everything changes. And the system is not prepared for that. When the victim takes control over her life, she can no longer be abused. When the addict is no longer caught in addiction, the whole system changes. When the oppressed claim rights, the oppressors lose their evil power. When the leader of the synagogue challenged Jesus, Jesus declared, "you phonies! This daughter of Abraham and Sarah whom satan has kept in bondage for eighteen long years -- should she not be released from these bonds just because it is the sabbath?"

This woman had suffered for 18 years of a burden so great she was weighed down, bent over and Jesus would not be prevented from healing. Imagine Jesus cutting through all the phoniness, self righteousness, and maliciousness and turning to this woman, this woman who has no name but whose story lives forever, this woman who bore her visible affliction, Jesus with love in his eyes, authority in his words, and healing in his touch, empowers her to stand free.

Where are the weights in your life? Where are the weights that give you pain? Immobilize you? Create fear and anxiety? Where are the burdens that consume your energy?

What weighs you down? Bends you over?

The burdens of family pressures. The desperation of watching someone we care about make dreadful choices for their lives. The conflict of choices - my career needs or yours -- one more night away. A pastoral emergency guaranteed to occur prior to or during every scheduled family event.

What weighs you down?

That list of things to do that doesn't get any shorter, pastoral calls, shut ins, letters to write, meetings to organize, a day off -- someday.

What weighs you down?

Addiction -- to food, to alcohol, to drugs, to work. The addiction of someone you love for which you take responsibility.

What weighs you down?

The weight of the world? Children abused and misused, children without enough food, 12 million every day in the united states alone. Seemingly endless brutality in Bosnia, South Africa, and Palestine. Our beautiful, delicate, blue green planet vulnerable as greed and apathy drive us to increasing misuse of creation.

What weighs you down?

Mourning -- a sorrow so great it is stifling, sapping your breath and your energy. Pent up, unwept tears of anguish.

What weighs you down?

Unresolved resentments. Anger so deep and so strong that if you even begin to get in touch with it, you might never get to the end of it. It might consume you.

"She was bent over and unable to straighten up even a little."

This afternoon I want to invite you to experience a guided meditation -- a form of spiritual exercise with which I'm sure many of you are familiar. Let this be a time of listening to God. I'll make some suggestions based on the Luke passage. Let yourself be led by the Holy Spirit, be aware of any temptation to resist or to control.

Some of you may find you experience very vivid and powerful images -- if so, appreciate them but try not to be captured by them. The temptation may be to even be entertained by them, to even idolize them. The essential thing we're doing here is being present for Christ -- becoming aware of the presence of God.

Others may find that no image really comes. Also let that go, remember that even if you have merely a vague awareness of God's presence, something is happening.

Whatever experience you might have, allow yourself to simply rest in the healing presence of Christ.

One of my favorite all time quotes is from Bishop Dale White who said, "Our spirituality is as unique as our finger prints." The truth of that statement is vividly reflected in the way we experience guided meditation.

I'll read the story again in a moment. Try to listen to the story as if you are hearing it for the first time. Before I read it, I invite you to sit up straight, in a comfortable position, close your eyes, put your feet firmly on the floor, feel yourself supported by the chair, take a deep breath. . .Muscle relaxing. . .Attentiveness, then letting go of sounds. . .Create for yourself a sacred space within. Offer a silent prayer that you might be open to the Holy Spirit within you.

"Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. A woman showed up who for eighteen years had been afflicted by a spirit; she was bent over and unable to straighten up even a little. When Jesus noticed her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are freed from your affliction.' He laid hands

on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began to praise God."

The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version, Robert J. Miller, ed., Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1992.

Go now to a place that is comfortable for you, perhaps a meadow, perhaps a beach, perhaps a room. . .

Look around at all you see. . .What are the objects, how do they feel, what aromas do you sense, what sounds do you hear. .
.Be there as fully as you can.

Be aware of a heavy burden you are carrying, weighing you down. . .So heavy that you are bent over from the weight of it. .
.What is that burden? What does it look like? Allow all of your sense to experience that burden. What does it feel like. Be in touch with the feeling of that burden. . .

Now be aware of Jesus . . .Let him know you cannot manage this burden alone. . .

He begins lifting the burden. . What is he communicating to you? Be aware of how it feels to have the weight lifted. . .

Feel yourself shedding the burden, straightening up, standing straight. . .Be aware of your feelings now. . .

What do you need to communicate to Jesus? Allow whatever will to happen. . .Offer a prayer to Jesus, let it emerge from your heart, it may be a prayer for yourself, the world, another,

for forgiveness, joyful thanksgiving. Allow yourself to be received into the loving, compassionate heart of God. . .Rest in the loving presence of God. . .Do anything else that you need to do . . .Very slowly, gently let the scene fade. . .Remind yourself that you can return here at any time.

When you are ready, come back to this time and place and open your eyes.

God receives into God's loving care our bent-overness and through the healing power of Jesus Christ, calls us to release the overwhelming burdens we carry into God's care and to stand free.

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