

THE BENT- OVER WOMAN

Sermon for August 22, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 58:6-14 and Luke 13:110-17

She came to worship in the Synagogue as she probably had every Sabbath for the last 18 years plus. She came as she was, bent over, a back that was twisted and sore. She could hardly see anything except the ground beneath her. It was impossible to look anyone straight in the face. If she tried to do so, her neck would strain and hurt. Just walking hurt her and there were no Aleve or Advil to ease the pain. Can you imagine coming to the Synagogue for 936 Sabbaths (52 weeks times 18 years) and still no one even knew her name! She was called the bent-over- woman. If people thought about her at all, it was probably with scorn, seeing her as cursed, maybe possessed, her condition a punishment from God. In those days any physical infirmity was thought of as God's punishment or being the work of the Devil. She undoubtedly sat on the far side of the other women, maybe way up back, off to herself. There were no welcoming greeters for her. No doubt about it, whatever the cause of her condition, she was oppressed, bent over with many burdens. The oppression we can see is a physical one. I wonder what other burdens may have been heavy on her emotionally and spiritually. Could part of her oppression be just that she was a woman, which definitely would diminish her worth in Jesus' time, even more than yesterday or today? I wonder about the other women at the synagogue. What kind of burdens did they feel, the burdens that could not be seen physically? For that matter, what about the men? It would be especially

shameful if they showed themselves burdened and bent—and isn't that a burden in itself? More about this later but now back to the Bent-Over-Woman.

Can you imagine what a shock it was when she heard Jesus calling her? We are told that he was teaching in the Synagogue when he saw her. He called her "Woman", and somehow she knew that he was referring to her. He called her out of the margins into the center of the crowd. And then Jesus did an amazing thing. He laid his hands upon this bent over woman and told her that she was set free from her ailment; and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. Amen! What a blessing! He also did another thing—a little later on while engaged with the disapproving leader of the synagogue—he gave her a new name: the daughter of Abraham. Jesus gave two gifts to this woman: the gift of rest from her bent over, painful existence, and just as important—the gift of recognition as a daughter of Abraham, a member of the chosen people.

Now Jesus did all of this on the Sabbath, much to the disapproval of the leader of the synagogue. In the last part of our Isaiah reading today, we are instructed as to the importance of the Sabbath as a day set apart, a day that is holy, honorable, and a delight—a joy for those who observe it by not being preoccupied with one's work or as Isaiah says, "your own interests or pursuing your own affairs". For the Jews, observing the Sabbath has been not only a part of their Law since Moses time, but also a part of their worship of God. Isaiah points out that although the men he was addressing fasted, prayed, and kept the Sabbath, they then went on to exploit their workers. He says that keeping the Sabbath, and then oppressing the poor will not lead to God's delight.

Abstaining from food profits nothing, says Isaiah, when one abstains from mercy and justice. *Additions here*

What about in our own world—our church, our neighborhood and so forth? Each of us has the opportunity to see those that are burdened. It's probably easiest to see someone that's physically beaten down or disfigured. It's harder to see the person that is burdened by emotional problems, addictions, economic problems, divorce and family dissension. In our congregation right now I know there are people that fit these categories, and I wonder how many of you out there are suffering and none of us even knows. What kind of burdens are you carrying today? Is it health issues, physical and emotional suffering? (?) Is it a burden that comes from being the sandwich generation, having to deal both with children and aging parents? Is the burden coming because of unresolved grief from a severe loss either through death or other types of separation? Is it because you just don't have enough money to pay the bills and no hope of more income in sight? What about the burden of not being able to do one's art because society doesn't value it enough to reimburse you fairly? Does the weight of your burden keep you from standing up straight? I invite you that are suffering to let me know.

Dear church family, why do you come to church? I'm sure there are many answers. I do not believe that we come to church to simply enjoy each other's company, to hear beautiful music, to sing favorite hymns (at least once in a while), or because someone is pressuring us to come. I believe that most of us are here this morning because somewhere in the deepest part of our spirit is a

hunger for God and the kingdom or reign of God that Jesus told us about. One of my favorite definitions of this reign of God is by Hans Kung, a Roman Catholic, Swiss priest, who says that the reign of God is God's creation healed. God's creation healed. Can you imagine a world where poverty is healed, where racism is healed, where there is no longer discrimination or prejudice towards GLBT folks, where environmental problems are healed and so forth. What a world that would be!

Whatever your situation, my sisters and brothers, Jesus is calling to you. He is stretching out his hand; he's waiting to call you in from your burdens. He is waiting to free you, give you dignity and recognition. Can you recognize him? Is he right here this morning? Will you let him transform you, set you free, so that you can stand straight and praise the name of God? As your pastor, I have my arms open to enfold you in that precious love. May God bless each and every one of you as I now close with part of a poem that came to me from Anna on my clergy email:

Excerpts from OH WOMAN ... DEAR NAMELESS WOMAN

By Anna Murdock

Oh woman, dear nameless woman,
how your heart must long
to look into the eyes of others once more;
to seek hope and acceptance and love.
But alas, you cannot, can you?
Your head cannot be lifted.

For whatever reasons, it is bent low.
You see only the dust of the streets
and the feet of those who
step over you and around you
and on you.

Oh woman, dear bent-low woman,
God has brought you to this place ...
to this synagogue ... to this person
who is teaching freedom from bondage.
On this day ... yes, on this very Sabbath day
you will be set free
and will stand tall once more.

He has called you ... not by name, but "Woman".
Even before his touch,
even before you might stand tall,
he proclaims that those things
that had kept your head low
and your back so bent
be gone forever.

Did you hear his words, dear woman?

SET FREE!

Set free from all of the bent-down bondage!

**His eyes are the first eyes
that you have seen in so long.**

**How can you not respond
in the way that you do!**

Standing straight ... Praising God!

**May all of you be set free from what ever is causing you pain. May we
help each other to stand up straight and praise God. Amen and Amen**