

Standing by Grace

August 22, 2010, Luke 13:10-17

A Crippled Woman Healed on the Sabbath

¹⁰On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, ¹¹and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit of illness for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." ¹³Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

¹⁴Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

¹⁵The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? ¹⁶Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing.

Back in the ancient world, people had many different images about what supported our planet. Some people believed that the world rested on a turtle or some other animal. Other people believed that a giant or a god named Atlas was holding up the Earth.

Today we know that the world is suspended in space, orbiting in the sun's gravitational pull. There is no visible, physical being underneath the world to hold it in place. It's all very scientific. We no longer believe in the mythical explanation of some giant creature holding the earth up.

But we have a saying that holds on to that old idea. We sometimes say ----"It feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders!" or ---much better! --- "It felt like the weight of the world was lifted OFF my shoulders!"

Sometimes it feels like we are carrying the weight of the world! We get so stressed out that we feel that we can hardly move, that we are bent over under the weight of all the things we have to do, all the responsibilities we have, all the suffering and struggles we have, and that we see around us.

It seems like all we can do is trudge along under everything we are going through, all the bills we have to pay, all the work we have to do, all the responsibilities we have taken on or that are thrust upon us.

Sometimes it feels like there is no time to sit and enjoy life, to stop and smell the roses, to stop and look up at the stars. We are bent over with earthly things---the weight of the world on our shoulders.

In our passage from Luke today, we heard about the healing of the bent-over woman. For 18 years she had been unable to straighten up, so she walked bent over, looking at the ground.

We don't know the nature of her problem. It is translated as "a spirit of sickness," "a spirit of infirmity," or a "spirit of weakness." People in Jesus' time did not understand physical problems the way we do today. They didn't have MRIs and x-rays to help diagnose. They didn't have surgery or even chiropractic to treat problems.

What they often thought was that a person must have sinned, must have committed some offense against God that he or she was being punished for. Or else they were possessed by a demon or had a bad spirit, such as a spirit of illness.

We have no reason to think that she suffered from anything other than a physical problem. Maybe she had severe back spasms or kidney problems or even some broken bone that prevented her from standing upright.

There is no way of knowing the exact nature of her problem.

We only know what we were told in the scripture. She had been bent over for 18 years. She came to synagogue. Jesus was teaching. As soon as he saw her, he called her to come forward and then he healed her! He spoke and laid hands on her, and she was healed! She straightened up and started praising God!

Nowadays Jesus is not here in the flesh to lay hands on us to heal us, but healings still do happen. Sometimes they are miraculous, instantaneous, and sometimes they happen through the healing powers of our own bodies or through the skills of a doctor.

Sometimes healing comes through a psychologist or a pastor or a friend.

Because physical ailments are not the only things that can cause suffering for 18 years!

People can suffer from mental illness or psychological problems. Anyone who has ever been depressed knows how heavy that illness weighs on a person. Anyone who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder knows how debilitating those diseases can be.

Anyone who has a degenerative disease knows how hard it sometimes is to look forward to the coming years.

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Do we go to hear Jesus teach? Do we at least show up
HOPING for a miracle?

The woman in the story came to synagogue when Jesus was there teaching. We don't know if she went to synagogue every Sabbath or if she just went because she had heard that Jesus would be there.

She did not ask for healing. Other people in scripture call out to him for mercy, but she does not. She doesn't ask for the miracle. Jesus offers it to her. There are no conditions.

He doesn't wait for her to show some evidence of great faith. He doesn't quiz her to make sure that she has repented first. He calls her to him, tells her she is free, and lays hands on her.

Then she straightens up for the first time in 18 years and begins praising God!

But it doesn't come off without a hitch. The leader of the synagogue points out that it's the Sabbath, and healing someone is work that violates the commandment against working on the Sabbath. "Come back tomorrow" he says. "Don't come for healing on the Sabbath."

And he has a real concern! If word gets out about the healing, the place will be swarmed with lepers and cripples and blind people and who knows who else??

Better to come back the next day so the Sabbath can be nice and quiet, and worship will not be disrupted. And by then maybe things will calm down and people will stop shouting their praises to God!!

Jesus, however, responds. “Don’t you give your animals food and water on the Sabbath? Don’t you untie them, set them free to eat and drink? All I did was set this woman free from being tied up with her illness so that she can enjoy the abundant life!

All I did was take care of this daughter of Abraham, this beloved child of God the same way you take care of your cow!

What had happened in the years since Moses came down the mountain with the 10 Commandments was that a lot of additions had been made to them.

People were evidently unclear about what “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” meant in practice, and so they added a lot of specifics. The rule “Don’t work,” made sense, because God rested, and so should we.

But all kinds of work became forbidden. And not just work that earned a living, but cooking a meal, and even lighting a candle became forbidden. Walking---no more than a short distance. And on and on with the details of daily living.

So the synagogue leader was classifying healing as work, something that was not allowable on the Sabbath.

Jesus reacted to that idea strongly, in no uncertain terms. Everyone takes care of their animals and that's allowed. So why isn't taking care of a daughter of Abraham, one of God's own children okay?

The leader had no answer for that, and the people just kept on praising God. There was no calming them down!

As part of my education over the past several years, I learned a number of different ways to pray.

One prayer method that evolved out of what I was taught, I call the Jesus Chair. It begins with the Breath Prayer, breathing deeply while repeating simple words to center myself---either “Lord, have mercy” or “Love” on the inhale and “Fear” on the exhale or some other words that are appropriate at the time.

And then I sit and listen. Other ideas come and go and I let them, listening for the voice of God in my own silence.

The reason I call it the Jesus Chair is this---

When I started doing this, I found it easier to avoid distractions if I sat on the floor in front of my chair, leaning my back against the seat of the chair. I don't know why this worked for me, but it did.

And as I prayed I began to picture sitting at the feet of Jesus, leaning back against his lower legs. Soon, it felt like his hands were on my shoulders, like I could hear him breathing behind me. And then, when I heard the voice of God, there he was, supporting me.

And then I took this one step further. I stopped sitting in front of my chair, and instead, I sat on it. And I imagined that it wasn't just a chair any more. It was Jesus. Not Jesus sitting in a chair with me on his lap----Jesus is the chair.

The arms of the chair are Jesus' arms. The back and seat and legs of the chair are Jesus' body and legs. It is a Jesus Chair!

I sit in prayer, feeling the arms of Jesus around me, the strength of Jesus behind me, and I feel calm and safe. I put my hands on the hands of Jesus and hear him speaking into my ear.

Sitting in the Jesus chair makes a huge difference in my life, no matter what's going on. To feel so loved, so cared for, changes everything!

Many, many times the weight of the world, the sorrow and the stress, the guilt and the pain, has been lifted off my shoulders and I stand up straight once again and begin praising God!

All because Jesus invites me to come to him and he speaks to me and lays his hands on me!

A miracle not just on the Sabbath, but any day of the week!

Now I do have to say that sometimes the healing doesn't happen that day. Sometimes I have to be persistent and sit in the Jesus chair a number of times before anything changes. I still have to keep on knocking until I get an answer! I cannot give up!

Maybe the Jesus Chair is not something you can or even want to imagine and try to experience, but you can if you want to. If you would like me to help you try, please ask.

The truth is that however you can believe the good news, believe it! Believe that Jesus Christ came to heal you, to raise you up, to enable you to stand up straight!

He is waiting for you to come to him so that he can speak healing words, so that he can touch you!

Not because you beg him to. Not because you earned it by anything you did, but for one reason only!

So you can begin praising God! And so that people around you will also praise God!

Don't let anyone steal your joy! Don't let anyone stop you from praising God!

Come! Come to Jesus. Sit in the Jesus chair or kneel at his feet, and let him touch you and heal your broken heart, your wounded soul!

You can come on the Sabbath or any other day of the week, because it is not work for Jesus to help you. It is his pleasure!

We are all well-loved sons and daughters of the living God! And Jesus came to set us free from the bondage of the weight of the world. Accept the gift of God's grace that is offered by Jesus Christ, and straighten up, praising God!

Amen!