

## Bent Over No More!

There are a lot of bent over people in the world.

Earlier this summer, in a little Mexican restaurant in Red Lodge, Montana, I was impressed to see reproductions of artist Diego Rivera's work on the walls. The peasants in his paintings are often bent over, working in the field, carrying a heavy load of bricks on their back, or even toting a basket of flowers bound for the market, so large that its carrier must kneel and bend at a 90 degree angle to receive the load. A woman grinding corn; a child planting seeds—the workers bend while the bosses and authorities stand erect. For Rivera and others, being a common worker means being bent over in this world.

There are other reasons for being bent over. For some, the crippling effects of back injuries or osteoporosis intensify with age. Their stooped posture hints at the pain they endure day after day, year after year. Perhaps the woman who met Jesus in the synagogue that Sabbath day suffered from back issues which could be diagnosed, and maybe treated, today. In her time and place, her affliction was attributed to Satan. Surely it felt to her like an evil spirit, hobbling her mobility, making her unable to look at others eye to eye, and isolating her from community. Some may have blamed her, and shamed her, with their belief that she brought it on herself.

And then there are metaphorical ways to be bent over. Burdened with the weight of responsibility. Crippled by anxiety, depression, or grief. Demeaned by poverty, or poverty of spirit, or by the world's cruelty.

There are a lot of bent over people in the world.

But do you remember when Jesus announced his mission in the synagogue in Nazareth, reading from the scroll of Isaiah? He was announcing his mission to bent over people. Luke tells the story in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of his gospel. Remember what Jesus read?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

So it should have been no surprise to his followers, and maybe not to bystanders, either, that Sabbath day when he saw the woman who was literally bent over, when he recognized her dignity diminished, when he named her a daughter of Abraham, then touched her broken body, and pronounced her whole. That's what he said he was there to do—to release the captives, to let the oppressed go free. So that's what he did.

It was the best way he knew to keep the Sabbath, and it was wholly in keeping with Jewish tradition. Rabbi Jesus may have been in the minority in his interpretation of the Law, but contrary to the officious synagogue leader who, like that great pretender, the Wizard of Oz declared, "Come back tomorrow!" Jesus saw the Sabbath as the perfect day to set a bent over woman free.

Jews in first century Palestine were as diverse as Jews in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. They would all have agreed that keeping the Sabbath was important, part of their Law and tradition. But they would

have actively debated the application of that Law, in a tradition of debate known as the Oral Torah. Most of us are familiar with the Ten Commandments, in which keeping the Sabbath holy is the fourth commandment, as found in the book of Exodus, chapter 20. This commandment receives a long explanation.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. (Exodus 20:8-11)

But lesser known is the version of the Ten Commandments found in Deuteronomy 5. And in this version, the sabbath commandment has a different rationale. After listing all to whom this commandment applies, similarly to the Exodus version, there is no mention of the Lord resting on the seventh day, after six days of creating. Instead, it says this:

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord brought you out from there with a mighty wind and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord commanded you to keep the sabbath day. (Deut. 5:15)

Rabbi Jesus apparently was following the Deuteronomic understanding of the purpose of the Sabbath, that it is a day to celebrate freedom, to rest because God's people once were slaves but now by God's grace were free. Slaves are bound to work seven days a week, bent over by their labor, but free people can take a day to thank God, to rest in God's mercy and deliverance, and to remember the story of their salvation.

There were a lot of bent over people in Jesus' world, and he used the Sabbath as an occasion to demonstrate that God's work of setting people free was not a one-time event when the Hebrew slaves escaped from Egypt. As God's ambassador, when Jesus saw the oppressed woman, he had compassion for her. And there in the synagogue on the Sabbath, he showed everyone that God's mercy and liberation are still at work, setting free those who are bent over. The kingdom of God, like a mustard seed, was growing before their eyes. God's reign of justice and mercy, like a bit of yeast, was leavening the flour and rising before their eyes.

In recent days when anti-Semitism has been on the rise, and accusations of anti-Semitism bandied about, it is more important than ever for the Christian community to examine its own rhetoric and repent of any contribution to such unChrist-like speech or thought. Jesus did stir up the Jewish leadership of his day, and he made some enemies. But in this story, there is only one Jewish leader who looks foolish and mean, while the great crowd of Jews is thrilled with Jesus' interpretation of what's okay on the Sabbath. They are thrilled because they, too, are bent over by the burdens of life in the world. They are thrilled because they see in Jesus' actions the inbreaking of the promised day of the Lord, the reign of God. They are thrilled because the story of their salvation is the story of being set free.

It is also the story of our salvation. In Jesus Christ, we are no longer bent over. Christ's mercy and power are here, and now, ready to set us free. Maybe your burden is physical. Christ does not cure every disease—surely there were others who were suffering in the synagogue on that Sabbath day—but he promises that the blind will see. So we ask for healing, we pray for God's mercy, and we do receive

grace to live with the afflictions which are not cured. The mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting, and God's mercy sets us free from bondage to our physical weaknesses.

Or maybe your burden is the burden of poverty. Last month I was in an audience listening to speakers from "Amplify Montana," a program which empowered Gallatin Valley Food Bank clients to tell their story so that those who make laws and set policies and those who vote could hear and understand what leads to poverty and what it's like to live in poverty. One person told his story of growing up in Bozeman, losing his job in the recession, and becoming homeless because, in his depression, he couldn't get back on his feet and get another job. Another told of spousal abuse and threats which took her from being a successful businesswoman to being trapped in a community where she knew no one. A third talked about the chronic illness of her children and her inability to obtain expensive needed medication for them. They had all heard "come back tomorrow" responses from people who had no real intention of helping them out. But learning to tell their stories was empowering.

Jesus says, "I am here for you today." Again and again, he proclaims in word and deed, "today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. The kingdom of God is here." Theologian Justo Gonzalez says, "every Christological assertion also has ecclesiological implications," (2010, *Luke*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, p. 176) meaning that if we say it's true of Christ, there are implications for Christ's church. We are called to present for those who are bent over. We are the growing mustard tree, the rising lump of flour. We are Christ in the world, set free to be liberators in his name and power.

Tomorrow evening we have an opportunity to hear from two people who have answered that call in Zambia, central Africa, as Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) mission co-workers. Charles Johnson is helping develop sustainable agriculture practices which future ministers can take to their villages, transforming backbreaking traditional agriculture and developing strong communities. Melissa Johnson is lifting up women and children as she encourages health education which keeps girls in school. I hope you will join us for their inspiring and joyful sharing of their answer to Christ's call.

But it's not necessary to go far away to find bent over people. It's not necessary to become a miracle worker, either, in order to do Christ's work. There are bent over people everywhere, yearning for someone to see their dignity, lean over to look them in the eye, and lift them up by listening, by touching, by caring for them. When we think that religion means keeping everything in order and playing by the rules, we are making the mistake of the officious synagogue leader. But when we remember that God's salvation means freedom, liberation from evil and oppression, then we will act like Jesus. That's what Christians do. That's the purpose of keeping Sabbath.

My friends, I'll say it again. There are a lot of bent over people in the world. Many of them are us. But in Christ, we are bent over no more. We are learning to stand up straight. In Christ, we are people who help other people stand up straight.

May it be so.