

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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August 21, 2016  
*21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time*  
Luke 13:10-17

### **View-changing Healing**

This story of Jesus, on the sabbath, healing the woman bent over for 18 years is one that is filled with several layers of meaning. Each of the 3 main players in this story has a particular perspective or view on what is happening. As a result, each of these 3 has a different experience as the story unfolds.

The 3 are, Jesus, of course, the bent over woman, and the leader of the synagogue. And like in many other of the stories about Jesus, there was also a crowd of people who witnessed what happened.

At a very basic level, this story is about healing and making whole. It is one of many such stories in the larger story of Jesus' life and ministry. Healing stories are a particular kind of miracle story that we read about in the gospels.

Miracle stories are those events where Jesus is credited for accomplishing something that is surprising, unexpected and that has no clear explanation. Miracle stories most often seem to defy the laws of physics and of nature itself. The miracles that Jesus performs point to his divine nature that put him above the limitations of human living. As people of faith, we understand the miracles as confirmation of Jesus' oneness with God and with the Holy Spirit.

The miracles performed by Jesus, like the miracles that we read about elsewhere in the Bible are all signs of the sovereignty of God in which there are no limitations or parameters. It's one of the ways that we understand God to be the creator of everything seen and unseen.

To recap: Jesus was teaching in a synagogue one day on the sabbath—the Jewish day of rest and worship. Jesus embraced the teaching role of Rabbi as a way of living out his Jewish faith. Jesus was a particularly good teacher because there was always a crowd gathered around him, eager to learn from him, whenever he was teaching.

As he was teaching, he became aware of a woman who was bent over and unable to stand up straight. There isn't a specific condition named, but it would seem to be an affliction like advanced or severe osteoporosis or something of the like since it's mentioned that she has suffered this way for 18 years. Nothing is said of the woman reaching out to Jesus or approaching Jesus. Rather, it was Jesus who took the initiative. When Jesus saw her he told her to come over to him. And when she did, Jesus laid his hands on her and declared, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." She was immediately able to stand up straight having been cured of her affliction.

Everyone witnessing this healing was stunned—the woman, the crowd, and the leader of the synagogue. But stunned in different ways. The woman cured was stunned to be freed from the bondage of her disease in the blink of an eye, when she didn't even ask for it. The crowd was stunned to witness the healing of a woman that they had come to know as the one who was permanently hunched over. And the leader of the synagogue was stunned because of what he perceived to be a blatant breaking of the law in which faithful Jews are to perform no work on the sabbath day of rest.

Now often when unpacking this story the focus has been on the perspective of the leader of the synagogue and his outrage at Jesus performing the work of healing on the sabbath when no such work

is permitted in the Jewish law. And indeed that is what the affect is all about when Jesus is confronted with this accusation by the Jewish authority. He points out to Jesus that there is plenty of opportunity for such work on 6 days of the week and that he should have refrained from such healing work until the next day. In essence he is saying that even though Jesus had presumably not taken notice of the hunched over woman prior to that particular sabbath, he nevertheless should have waited to perform the healing miracle.

Jesus, of course, is incensed over the rigidity of this Jewish leader's adherence to the law that has no measure of compassion within it. He proceeds to call attention to the hypocrisy of those who have the compassion to attend to the physical needs of their domestic animals, even on the sabbath, and yet have no such compassion for a sister (or daughter) in the faith who is afflicted by a physical bondage of sorts.

The law-abiding leader of the synagogue and his sympathizers are affected and convicted by what Jesus says and in the words of the gospel writer, "all his opponents were put to shame; . . ."

So the perspective on this story from the viewpoint of the law abiding leader of the synagogue is one that changes. His rigidity and blind adherence to the details of the law is successfully challenged by Jesus at least insofar that he was said to have been put to shame. Hopefully he moved from that stance of shame to a more gracious and nuanced view of law enforcement.

Many a sermon have been preached on this move from legalism to grace by focusing on the Jewish leader's viewpoint. Perhaps you have heard such sermons.

Today though I'd like to move from that focus to a somewhat different focus as we further unpack this story this morning. I'd like to look at this event from the perspective of the hunched over woman.

And when I say that I literally mean from her physically hunched over position. It has been years now that the woman's default view is the ground before her. To look ahead requires her to crane her neck in an uncomfortable way such that she does it only enough to make her way without stumbling. To see the faces of others and to see the world around her, including the sky above, requires her turning her head uncomfortably to her left or right. And again the required stretching of her neck to look upwards was likely done sparingly to avoid increased pain and discomfort. This woman's affliction has caused her to narrow her view on the world to the point that it is primarily a looking downward—a viewpoint not generally shared by others.

Surely for those who are able to live with an upright and straight posture, it takes a few moments to try to visualize this very different perspective of the hunched over woman that Jesus encountered. Add to this the detail that the woman has suffered this malady for 18 years. That's a long time. In our day and time, 18 years is the interval from birth to adulthood. Or from an adult perspective, 18 years is nearly half of an average working life. To be hunched over for this extended time surely has changed not only the woman's physical reality but her mental and emotional outlook as well.

There's at least one more detail worth noting here as well. As in many other places in the Bible, this story makes reference to a spirit that was the source of her condition. In fact as Jesus is scolding the Jewish leaders he also makes this point when he says, "And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (Lk. 13:16) The reference to a spirit and to Satan is intriguing.

In the case of the hunched over woman, attributing her situation to the spirit work of Satan suggests that what has happened in the life of this woman is that she has been if not outrightly separated from God, she has at least become somewhat estranged by her limited posture and the resulting downward orientation to her viewpoint on the world. She literally had much difficulty in looking upward—heavenward. And because her condition likely became worse and worse with each passing year, she perhaps did not perceive this increasing alienation between her and the world and her and God.

In fact it wasn't until Jesus saw her—saw her before she saw him—that the healing of her body resulted in the restoration of her soul—reconciliation with her God whom she immediately began praising in her restored upright state. Jesus recognized this alienation and moved right away to rectify it even though it meant breaking the law of the sabbath.

My friends, in our own day, while our viewpoints that move away from God and look more downward are not necessarily manifested in our physical bodies, they nevertheless creep in on us unawares. Our own viewpoints and perspectives on the world can become narrow and tunnelvisionesque, preventing us from looking upward—heavenward—in order to see our world from the big-picture perspective of God. The narrowness that can indeed afflict us results in our turning away from God and even turning in on ourselves.

When this happens, and it does happen, our need for healing and wholeness and reconciliation become as great as that of the hunched over woman.

What good news it is that Jesus is still taking the initiative as he did when he saw the hunched over woman. Before she, and before we, even know of the need, Jesus brings about that view-changing healing. We are restored and healed again and again and again.

As the woman stood tall and began praising God in the presence of all who were there, our own response of praise and thanksgiving result in our making visible to the world that there is a better way when our viewpoint, our perspective is outward to those around us in the world as well as upward toward the God we love.

Thanks be to God for not giving up on us, and for providing view-changing healing in our lives.