



The New England Church Pulpit

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Standing Tall While Bending Low

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Luke 13.10-17

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath when a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years appeared. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But Jesus answered him, saying "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham who has been bound for eighteen long years with this disease, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

The Real Work

by Wendell Berry

*It may be that when we no longer know what to do
we have come to our real work,
and that when we no longer know which way to go
we have come to our real journey.*

The mind that is not baffled is not employed.

The impeded stream is the one that sings.

I wish I knew her name. I would like to call her by the name given at her birth, the name that was defined by her unique personality, But Luke only refers to her as a woman; a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. I wish Luke had given us her name rather than a category, a name rather than a label, a name that would have set her apart from the illness that afflicted her. She is only known as the bent-over woman today but ultimately that is enough for us to find meaning in the story that is told in Luke's gospel.

Imagine what she must have felt like when Jesus helped her stand tall, when, for the first time, she could look someone in the eye, or gaze at the sky and see birds and clouds. The whole world was now in her line of sight. Her narrowness of vision was instantly broadened. She now represents what God intends for all of us, this unnamed woman being the model of the way God would have it for everyone.

But there's a dark cloud on the horizon of the new sky she now enjoys. It is the voice of the religionists, the fundamentalists, extremists who criticized Jesus for healing her on the holy sabbath day, a day set apart in Judaism when no work is to be done, a day when only prayer and meditation were undertaken. They warned her and the crowd around her in the sternest of tones that there are rules to be followed in the religious life and she was not complying. Jesus returns the volley with harsh words for the religious power mongers, pointing out their hypocrisy. **They** said after 18 years, what's one more day? **Jesus said** after 18 years what better day than the sabbath? I suspect from that time onward, every day was a sabbath for her!

It is a story of grace winning the day, of Jesus demonstrating once again what the world would be like if God were in charge. It is a story of a downcast, nameless woman who stood tall because someone—this Jesus—stooped low enough to look into her eyes to show her love.

But Jesus doesn't live here anymore, at least not in body and healing hands, so those of us who have chosen to be called by his name have been given the responsibility of being the body of Christ in this time and place. And it is our privilege—and challenge—to reach out to those who are bent over, those who can't raise their head to see the moon and the stars, those who can't look someone in the eye because they can't raise their head, those who can't raise their spirits enough to take the next step. And our stooping in solidarity with them becomes the conduit of holy grace to walk tall.

My mother is in a nursing home, having suffered a stroke complicated by dementia that confines her to a wheelchair. She is bent over and doesn't see much beyond her lap and the floor. One day while visiting her, a caring nurse by the name of Joyce, came by to see if mom needed anything. Joyce was no doubt in a hurry to take care of other needs, but she took the time to get down on her knees to look up into my mother's face when she asked if she could help in any way. Here was Jesus, dressed as a nurse named Joyce, who bent down to be at my mom's level. Though the nurse couldn't help my mother stand or look up, she brought a smile to that bent-over head that made the day for all of us there. This nurse, on her knees looking up into the eyes of a distorted body was a living prayer.

Theologian Dominick Crossan makes an important and vital distinction between disease and illness, and rightly so, I think. Disease is what one's body must deal with when it contracts a virus, or breaks a bone, or has osteoporosis. Disease is what sends us to the doctor. Illness, on the other hand, is the social response to a disease. Illness describes the way a culture treats a person with a disease. Disease is being crippled; illness is making fun of or ignoring the crippled person.

Not all of us are gifted to heal diseases more serious than a scraped knee or a splinter in a finger. But we are all capable of healing illnesses. And it starts with looking a person in the eye, whatever contortions that may take on our part, and seeing a loving soul, and then standing in solidarity with those who can't stand by themselves. Then, like Jesus, we must challenge those who create the illness by fostering a society that doesn't care.

A statistic a few years back said that the leading cause of death in the world is not heart disease or cancer, but poverty. Many diseases are born in poverty and many such diseases could be cured if we could cure the illness. Poverty is an illness that can be eradicated. At the very least, Jesus compels us to stand in solidarity with the people weighed down by society's marginalization, look them in the eye and help raise them up to dignity and health. But we are also called to eradicate poverty.

We are called to bend down so we can look up at the bent-overs. And we are called to stand up to the powers that be who keep the weak bent over. We have a voice and we have a vote to make it possible for the bent-overs to stand up tall. We are called to vote, not according to party line, not by the politicians or the platform that can do the most for me, but for leaders willing to change the culture of illness. Vote for those who will work for affordable housing; those who will pass laws on behalf of those who need health care insurance so they can have access to disease-healers as we do; vote for those willing to fight against homophobia, and islamophobia and sexism; fight the terrorists who slaughter people by the thousands; fight those who traffic in human sex trade.

The most recent report by Forbes tells us that there are 198 NEW billionaires in this country in 2016. With those kinds of resources available to some and not all, we are a poor nation, indeed, who can't—or won't—create a system that elevates everyone to a level playing ground. And the first person ever to **fall off** the Forbes billionaire list is author J. K. Rowling, of Harry Potter fame. Why? She fell off the list of billionaires because she gave so much of her money away to help those less fortunate than herself, it lowered her qualifying status. I ask you: which of these is more like the healer and which more like the critics in this story of Luke?

Many there are who are weighed down with a spirit that has crippled them, as Luke says. Many there are whose dreams have been shattered because disease has kept them from functioning fully and illness has dictated that they can't get paid unless they pull their own weight. Many there are who have borne more than their share of heartache and many who have been unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, hard as they may try.

Denise Crosby wrote an insightful article in the Beacon this week about the challenge she accepted to live on the allotment from food stamps which is \$1.25 a day for food. It was an exercise in frugality in the extreme, she said, and taught her what it would be like to have to live like that all the time. She expressed her gratitude for the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry who offered her fresh produce, meat and canned goods, and all the bread she could eat at no cost to supplement her dollar and a quarter budget. She showed us what it means in some small way to bend over to see real people in real situations who are weighed down by the social systems that keep them bent over.

Many of you perhaps saw the incarnation of Luke's story during the recent Olympics in Rio during the women's 5,000 meter run this past Tuesday. American Abbey D'Agostino collided with New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin, and both went down to the ground. It was devastating for both of them, but in a display of camaraderie, D'Agostino bent over to help Hamblin up, and together, to their credit, they hobbled to the finish line. Upon reaching it, they embraced. And the world cheered. The ministry of bending low to stand tall. It isn't about who gets the gold and the prestige. It's about seeing one another as named, important people not relegated to a category, or a disease, or a race, or a gender.

I wish I knew her name, this bent-over woman so I wouldn't have to call her by her label. But at the same time, as a nameless woman, she is everyone; everyone who is bent-over in body, mind, soul and spirit. And as everyone, she is a poignant reminder that we are called to bend over, look her in the eye, give her encouragement to walk tall even if she can't stand up straight. She is the epitome of what it means to live in the world as God intended it, the impeded stream that sings. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God whose love is unfailing and whose joys are new every morning, we bring ourselves into your presence that we may find release from all that concerned us in the week that is now over and that we might find hope for the week that is yet to come. We gather to center ourselves in this moment, to find in this time and place all that we need to be your servants of love and goodwill. Calm our spirits as we gather in this room to sing and pray, then make us a calming presence in the world where we will live in the days ahead.

We thank you for this church and the community of loving people that nurture and sustain us here. As we begin another school year, we particularly thank you today for the children and youth of our congregation and for their innate sense of hope for the future. We are grateful for their indomitable spirit that challenges conventional wisdom and traditional ways. We give thanks for their dreams and their insights, for their energy and playfulness. Anoint them with the delight of their own lives that they may see and believe that they are made in your holy image and gifted in ways that will make a profound difference in this world. Inspire them to believe in all that is good about humanity and sustain them with a wisdom that comes from your holy presence.

Create in all of us today a sense of appreciation for all that is around us: the people, the places we visit, the people who serves us as police officers, medics, firefighters, restaurant staff, garbage collectors, and the host of people who make life good for us. We thank you for the advances of modern science and medicine, the caring of those who nurture us, the political leaders who seek to guide the nations of the earth, the warmth of the sun, the beauty that comes from autumn rains and the birds that fly in the air.

For those of our knowing who need support and encouragement, we offer our prayers, committing ourselves to be the feet, the hands, and the wings of those prayers to the people who particularly need them. Open our eyes to see hurting, bent people that we might help them raise their eyes to your hope.

May our appreciations guide us toward hope and peace, in the name of Christ, amen.