

Like Socrates before him, Jesus was a teacher (or to be precise, a rabbi). He was a Jew from the north who was in conflict with the temple authorities in Jerusalem. He taught in synagogues and was, at least until he pushed the envelope, a welcome presence there as an interpreter of the Torah and the Prophets. As far as we know he didn't write things down; that would come later. He healed many people and some of those healing stories, like the one before us today, were remembered and eventually written down.

So one day, this woman comes to the synagogue. She suffers from really bad osteoporosis in the days before calcium supplements. Try to imagine one day in the life of this woman...what it would be like to go through a twenty-four hour period bent over and facing the ground, unable to stand upright. And then multiply that by 365 and imagine going through one year like that. And then multiply that by eighteen years, for that is how long the storyteller says she suffered in this way. Six-thousand-five hundred and seventy days of being bent over.

It is no fun to get old. But one of the hardest aspects of that process is that we can become isolated from others. If we can no longer drive, or if we are losing our hearing or going blind or suffering from Alzheimer's or living in a Nursing Home or bent-over from osteoporosis, maybe the hardest part is that we lose our sense of community. And without that it is hard to know who we are anymore.

*Eighteen years.* That is how long this poor woman suffered, trying to maintain her dignity and her relationships with friends and grandchildren. But notice that unlike so many of the healing stories in the Bible, she doesn't ask Jesus to do anything for her. Notice in this case it isn't her faith that makes her well. This is all about Jesus and the fact that it's the Sabbath is central. It is as much about his conflict with the religious leaders as it is about this woman. *So he calls her over.* And in her encounter with Jesus, this woman is healed. She stands upright again. She is able to look people in the eye. She is given a new lease on life. Such a miracle is enough to make even the most staid Episcopalian want to jump up and clap his hands and shout "alleluia!" *Praise the Lord!*

Only that isn't the reaction that Jesus gets. It's the Sabbath and healing is apparently considered to be work and everybody knows you aren't supposed to work on the Sabbath. So those who guard the rules are offended. They wish Jesus would have waited a few hours and done this on Sunday morning. He has profaned the Sabbath day, as they see it, and violated the Law of Moses.

Now we know how that conflict will end—on a cross. Jesus upsets the powers-that-be to the point where they just wouldn't take it anymore. He rocks the boat because he is more interested in serving the living God than in maintaining the institutions that claim to serve God. Holiness, according to Jesus, isn't about following the rules but about new and abundant life. You keep the Sabbath holy by opening the door to that Easter life. So he calls this woman a "daughter of

Abraham”—a pretty radical claim in his time and maybe even still today. Jesus sees this woman as a person worthy of God’s healing and redemptive love.

One place to begin with this text, then, is to ask ourselves what keeps us bent-over or isolated or weighed down? That is, to see this story as an invitation to our own healing. To see ourselves as this bent-over woman—maybe not physically bent-over but maybe emotionally, or spiritually. Maybe there is a lesson here for us that goes deeper than drinking our milk. Sometimes we can feel the weight of the world on our shoulders and that takes a toll on us. It can grind us down. In what ways does Jesus extend healing and an invitation to be a daughter or son of Abraham to us—as the Kingdom of God continues to unfold? What would our lives look like if we stood upright, and walked with courage, and followed him?

But we can’t stop there because to do so truncates the richness of this text. It makes it all about us, and takes the edge away that was in the original encounter and in Luke’s re-telling of it. There are theological and social and political aspects of this story as well.

Clearly everything Jesus did in his three-year ministry was not remembered in the Gospels. But this story is remembered, at least by Luke. In fact, of the four gospel writers, he is the only one who did. Luke especially likes healing stories and he also seems drawn to stories where there is major reversal and upheaval. This is Luke’s kind of story!

In Luke 3:8, John the Baptist tells people that they can’t count on Father Abraham to save them—that God can raise up children of Abraham from even stones. Luke seems clear that while the covenant with Abraham is binding for all time, that something radically new is happening, and the promise is being extended beyond what people had always done before. Zacchaeus is called a “son of Abraham” a few chapters later. Luke’s point is that God is doing a new thing, deeply rooted in the Abrahamic tradition, but not stuck there.

It was tempting for early Christians to see this as a polarity between Jews and Christians. But I think the reason Luke keeps the story alive by writing it down is to remind us that *no* religious tradition is exempt from the temptation to lock God into the past. Those who zealously guard the tradition and the rules can be found in *every* religious tradition (and they seem to be on the rise in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam today). They claim to love the tradition; but in reality it is their narrow *reading* of the tradition they love. My sense is that deep down they are afraid of God—the living God who is able to do new things and who refuses to be domesticated.

We need tradition to keep us rooted. We need memory and the stories of those who have gone before us. We need that great cloud of witnesses. But more than all those things, we need God-with-us, here and now. The good news of Jesus Christ is the coming of Emmanuel—God with us through thick and thin. We need the Pentecost story of the Holy Spirit who continues to guide us into all truth, which suggests that the truth is an unfolding process of discovery.

The great temptation for religious people is that we can get locked into the past and when we do that we aren’t honoring the tradition, we are worshipping it. The Bible calls that idolatry because it leaves no room for God’s Holy Spirit to move. So I think this text stands as a witness that the

first-century Church wanted to guard against becoming the kind of people who are offended by the One we claim to follow.

So all of that brings us to the leader of the synagogue. Not a very likeable character in this story. And yet, I want to suggest to you today that there is some part of all of us that is like that leader of the synagogue and we have to learn to see ourselves into the story there as well. We want to be faithful, but sometimes we just get it plain wrong. And we can become indignant when that happens, because we thought we had a handle on it all and then Jesus turns the tables again on us. We worry that the whole thing will come crashing down like a house of cards. In moments where Jesus confronts our fears directly, he scares us—or at least he scares me.

We need to remember that Jesus loves the Sabbath and in other places commands us to keep it holy as well. It's a mistake to think Jesus doesn't care about it. But he cares more about reclaiming its deeper meaning. The Sabbath is the fulcrum between love of God and love of neighbor. We are commanded to stop and rest so that we can encounter God in fresh ways and so that we can make neighborhoods. The Sabbath is intended to make community possible—because without it life is a rat race and everyone seems to be running around with their heads facing the ground. What makes the day holy is that it is a means to those ends—that it points us to God and our neighbor in need. As St. Paul would put it, if we have all the gifts and all the ministries and all the resources at our disposal but have not love we are just a lot of noise.

Maybe the leader of the synagogue in us is as bent over as that poor woman was, and maybe the only thing worse than being bent over from osteoporosis is to be spiritually crippled and not even know it. Jesus invites us to stand tall—all of us together; not just as individuals but as a faith community. To make synagogues, and mosques and churches places that are open to every son and daughter of Abraham

Jesus is hard to follow because he is always challenging the status quo, especially when it locks people out in the name of God. So we might dare to ask: what keeps the Church bent-over? Not just individuals—but how does the institution (and maybe once in a while even this congregation) keep us from actually encountering God because it plays to our fears rather than our deepest yearnings? The keepers of the rules always sound very pious and very religious. But underneath the piety I do think you always find fear, because if you can box God into your reading of the Bible, or your reading of the tradition, or your own experience—then you no longer need God. You can pretend to know God's ways with absolute certainty. As we stand up in faith, we trust God be God, so that we can be fully who we are meant to be. New life becomes possible.

As we get ready for church school to begin again, all of this suggests to me a mission statement of sorts that is rooted not just in this text but in the witness of the Scriptures: that we teach our children and our grandchildren the traditions of our rich heritage not so they can become slavishly obedient to the values of yesterday, but so that they are fully equipped and enriched to be the church today and tomorrow. So that above all else they will hear the living God call *them* by name and claim them as a son or daughter of Abraham—a beloved child of the living God, dedicated to following Jesus and sharing in the work of making all things new.