

STRAIGHT BACKS
Post Presbyterian Church
August 22, 2010
Luke 13:10-17

Sometimes—even in church—surprising things happen.

William Willimon, longtime chaplain at Duke University and now a Methodist bishop, remembers a new member drive organized in the small congregation he was serving years ago. Groups of two were sent out on a Sunday afternoon with a city map and assigned streets to knock on doors and invite people to church. One elderly couple took their street map, turned left instead of right, and ended up in the “wrong” neighborhood. When they returned to report, Helen and Gladys said they had discovered a real prospect, Verleen, who, indeed, not only showed up the next Sunday but signed up for the woman’s Bible study, which Willimon himself led.

The topic was temptation, and Will began by asking, “Have any of you been faced with temptation and, with Jesus’ help, resisted?”

The responses were pretty mild: one woman confessed that she had been tempted to keep a loaf of bread the supermarket checkout clerk had neglected to charge her for.

Then Verleen spoke up: “A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine

real big. . . . You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend—we knocked over a gas station, got \$200. He says to me, ‘Let’s knock over the Seven-Eleven.’ And something says to me, ‘No, I’ve held up the gas station with you, but no convenience store. He beat me . . . but I still said no. It felt great to say no. Made me feel like somebody.’”

Willimon remembers that after he recovered, he mumbled something like, “Well, that’s certainly resisting temptation.”

In the parking lot later, as he was helping one of the longtime group members to her car, Helen said, “I can’t wait to get home and get on the phone. Your Bible studies used to be dull. I think we could get a crowd for this.”

Willimon reflects, “Time and time again in our life together, just when we get everything figured out, the pews all bolted down and everyone blissfully adjusted to the status quo, God intrudes, inserts someone like Verleen just to remind the baptized that God is large, unmanageable, and full of surprises” (**William Willimon, *The Intrusive Word*, cited by Michael Lindvall in *A Geography of God***).

In a sermon entitled, “Expansive”, the pastor of the Fourth

Presbyterian Church in Chicago, John Buchanan says, “Something like that happened one day when Jesus was in the synagogue. It was the Sabbath, the day when all work stopped for his people and people went to their village synagogue. Jesus was teaching that day, and a woman walked in and quickly took her seat. She was “stooped,” a radical curvature of the spine. For eighteen years she’s lived with it. A literal translation is “bent.” It was more than a physical problem. In her culture, there was strong suspicion that a physical illness was the result of sin or, at the very least, being in the grip and under control of Satan. “A spirit crippled her,” Luke says. And so her condition was not only incredibly painful, physically awkward—everything was difficult: sitting, eating, drinking, walking, undressing—and relentlessly embarrassing; it was also socially isolating. She was alone, lonely, always.

She doesn’t ask for healing, doesn’t ask for anything. Simply walks in as quietly as she can, sits down to listen. Jesus sees her, stops teaching, is compelled by what he sees, this heartbreaking, pathetic woman; calls her, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And when he places his hands on her, she stands up straight for the first time in eighteen years, looking someone in the face for the first time in eighteen years, and, understandably, begins praising God. All this right in the middle of the synagogue Sabbath lesson, with

the small room crowded with people sitting on benches, men and boys on one side, women and girls on the other.

For Jesus, however, human need trumps religious law. For Jesus, religion ought to facilitate not prevent healing, wholeness, reconciliation, inclusion, restoration.” (See www.fourthchurch.org--August 26, 2007)

In the book, **Do What You Have the Power To Do**, Helen Pearson underlined the fact that women in the first century were viewed as less than fully human. Because of their menstrual flow, women were a source of ritual uncleanness and were forbidden to have contact with men. Women were also responsible for preparing the dead for burial, another source of ritual contamination. Women were not required or expected to follow the law and were forbidden to enter the synagogue during worship. For all these reasons, Jesus’ interaction with the stooped woman is remarkable. The woman is in the synagogue, apparently just after worship is concluded. Jesus addresses her; she does not approach him for healing. Not only does he speak to her, he lays his hands on her as part of the healing. When she is healed, she begins to praise God, a man’s prerogative. It is all amazing, and it all points to the beginning of a new reality.

When Jesus saw the bent-over woman, she became visible to others, including the persons in positions of authority and decision making. With their seeing, she could no longer be ignored. But Jesus did more than notice her. He called her and unexpectedly reached out to her. Even though the rabbinical law clearly stated that it was disreputable for a man to speak to any woman in public, Jesus made a point to speak to her. Jesus offered her freedom from her infirmity and assurance that she counted for something. No longer did she doubt her claim as a daughter of the covenant and a member of the household of faith. Jesus gave this woman the gift of attention that others had denied her.

An article in the medical journal, **Annals of Internal Medicine**, written by Dr. Barbara Hasko Curry tells the experience she had when she was on duty in the emergency room when the mother of a little girl who had been kidnapped and murdered checked in. Dr. Curry said, “The case was in the Billings, Montana newspaper every day and was every parent’s worst nightmare. The mother and father were in the media every day pleading for the life of their daughter who had disappeared on her way home from school one afternoon. She was ten and her body had just been found.”

Dr. Curry picked up the mother's chart. "Unable to sleep," was the presenting complaint. When Dr. Curry entered the examining room, the woman exclaimed, "Doctor, I am not sick. You know that, don't you? I am not sick. My heart is broken."

Dr. Curry remembers, "I stood in silence before her. I knew there was nothing in my black bag for this woman. All the sophisticated technology and state-of-the-art medicines at my disposal were worth nothing in the face of this devastating tragedy. Totally unequipped by years of training and experience, I could only cry."

Dr. Curry explained that doctors are conditioned not to cry, that if they allowed their feelings to control their behavior there would be more crying than medicine practiced, particularly in the emergency room. But she said, "there are times when shared emotion between physician and patient is the best, if not the only effective treatment.

"So I cried. We cried. We held each other and cried. She told me about her daughter's fine embroidery, and I told her about my little girl too. And then her husband came in and we all held each other and cried some more. And I know then how this family would make it. They would survive by spreading out their tremendous burden of grief to people who, like me, would be willing to share small parts of it, moments at a time, over weeks and months and maybe years, until

the burden would become manageable.” Dr. Curry concluded, “And I knew for that moment, I had given this patient the treatment that she most needed.”

The story about the bent-over woman is a story about paying attention to the needs of others and reaching out to help them. It is a story of healing, wholeness, peace, and salvation. Shalom, a Hebrew word for peace, means restoration of right relationships and a sense of well-being and serenity. When Jesus spoke words of shalom to those who were disenfranchised and disinherited by their society and religious community, it was far more than an everyday greeting. Jesus was bestowing upon them a very real spiritual blessing and the ability to be in relationship with their community once again.

Shelem, a Hebrew word for physical, emotional and spiritual wholeness, includes a person’s bodily health and well-being. Shalom and Shelem can never be experienced separately. Peace, right relations, wholeness, and health are intertwined. They do not exist for one person or one institution if they do not exist also for the benefit of all. No one stands upright as long as others remain bent over.

In the book, **Do What You Have the Power To Do**, Helen Pearson tells the story of 12 year old, girl who was weighted down by oppressive circumstances she did not create and from which she could never escape on her own. Jonella received inadequate health care and an improper diet. She was very poor and had been badly abused and she moved frequently from place to place and school to school. Helen Pearson said, “When I met Jonella, I was a volunteer in her learning disabilities classroom. Jonella had been attending this school for over six months and she had never spoken a word in her teacher’s presence, nor would she respond to any request to read or write. I sat beside Jonella day after day at her desk. Sometimes I talked to her, but mostly, I was just there for her. Occasionally Jonella would haltingly whisper something to me, but she would not pick up either pencil or crayon. One day, as I was leaving, Jonella ran after me, took my hand, kissed it, and thrust a wrinkled piece of paper at me.

Jonella never came back to school, but years later I remember her. I cannot forget her for she gave me one of the most precious gifts I’ve ever received. It was a letter written in big, bold, bright, orange print—Jonella’s favorite color.

It said, 'Dear Mrs. Pereson, I know you like butterflies and rainbows. Now I like them too. When you came to my room, nobody ever talked to me or nothing. Nobody chose me. Nobody touched me. Nobody called me by my name. I was invisible to most everybody but you sat with me, close in my seat. You talked with me, not past me. You touched me. It felt good to have someone hug me. When you say my name, I'm not invisible anymore. I'm me. I didn't understand about butterflies and rainbows at first but now I do. My heart has helped open my eyes. I see butterflies and rainbows lots of places now. I even feel safe to tell you, I love you. Jonella.

As Helen Pearson so beautifully illustrates both Jonella and the bent-over woman could not straighten up by their own strength and power. Neither woman could heal herself. We, too, must acknowledge in our own world that there are victims of tragic circumstances, of injustices, and of unfair laws and traditions who cannot heal themselves. In reaching out to the bent-over woman, Jesus challenges us to make their struggle our struggle. As long as anyone remains bent over, no one stands fully upright.

Michael Lindvall, pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City beautifully makes the point that we belong to one another and that when one person is lifted up from the burdens that cause them to be bent over, we are all lifted higher. In a chapter about baptism from his first book, **Good News from North Haven**, Michael Lindvall tells about the time he found one of his members sitting alone, weeping, in the sanctuary after a baptism. He had been at the church only a few months but he had learned that baptism in this church traditionally involved the grandparents and aunts and uncles all standing as the newest member of their family was held by the minister to receive the sacrament. The woman who was crying was named Mildred Cory and through her tears she told Michael that she had a new grandson and that she was thinking about his baptism. Michael told her to have her daughter, Tina, and her husband give him a call to make the necessary arrangements for the child's baptism.

“Tina's got no husband,” Mildred said. “She's eighteen and was confirmed in this church just four years ago and she started seeing this older boy a few years ago.” Mildred hesitated and then the rest of the story came tumbling out. “Tina got pregnant and Jimmy joined the Air Force and she decided to keep the baby and she wants

to have him baptized here, in her church, but she's nervous to come talk to you."

At that time and place, Tina's situation raised eyebrows and was controversial enough that the Session had a discussion about the appropriateness of the whole matter before approving it, which they did. The real problem, everybody knew, was when the minister got to the part when the whole family stands up and there wasn't going to be any, and her situation would be there for everyone to see.

So the day arrived and the church was full. An elder announced, "Tina Corey presents her son for baptism." Down the aisle Tina came, nervously, shaking slightly with month old Jimmy in her arms, a blue pacifier stuck in his mouth. The scene hurt all right, every bit as much as we knew it would.

"Who stands with this child?" Michael asked and Mildred, Tina's mother, stood up all by herself. Michael writes, "I was just about to ask Tina the parents question when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus McDowell had stood up in his blue serge suit, Minnie beside him. Then a couple other elders stood up, then the sixth grade Sunday School teacher stood up, then a new young

couple in the church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with Tina and little, Jimmy.”

Sometimes—even in church—surprising things happen!

And Jesus said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Faithful God, we gather together on this beautiful summer morning as a people of faith who know that we need one another if we are to truly become the people you created us to be. While we can grow strong on our own and we can achieve great things on our own, it is impossible to become fully human by our selves.

When life is going well for us, we sometimes neglect those around us and we fail to see the connections we have to all of your people. We pray that our vision might become bigger than our own self-interests and our daily agendas might grow to include people who have nothing to do with furthering our careers or aspirations. Like

Jesus, help us to be a little more sensitive to the problems, afflictions, and burdens of those in our midst so that we all might be more free and more whole.

When relationships are broken, our health is compromised, and circumstances have left us crippled and weighted down, we pray that others will notice and offer listening ears, helping hands and encouraging words to lighten our load. We pray for those in our community who are sick, grieving, recovering from surgeries and disease, or for those who are struggling with decisions and relationships and hard circumstances. Remind each of them of their significance and their place in the midst of our life together and help us to be with them in ways that facilitate healing, encourage life, and nurture faith for us all.

We also ask that your energy and regard would be with our children and teachers as they begin a new year of learning. We pray that they all have the patience, courage, and curiosity to seek out and go after the things that will enable them to be responsible, fun, honest, caring, and capable with the life and faith entrusted to us each. In the name of the one who claims us as his own and binds us together as one, we pray, Our Father, . . . AMEN