

Sermon Text: Luke 13:10-17

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Now, Rakeem, it's your day to preach. No, would you please get me some water? I need you to get me a glass of water. Okay. You don't have to preach today. I'm a little dry today.

I do try to start sermons, especially when the topic is serious, with a little bit of humor, and I think you know, after over three years now, that any humor I attempt is only going to be just a little bit. I did run this by, as I told the 8:28 crowd; I ran it by my wife, Caroline. She said, "Do not use it." We've already used it once so we might as well go full speed ahead.

It seems a man went to a discount clothing store to buy a suit. The clerk brought out one that he had at a very low price to try on, and the man said, "You know, it doesn't fit. The sleeves are too long." The salesman said, "You know, well, all you've got to do is sort of hunch your shoulders up like this, and now the sleeves are just about right." The man said, "Okay, but the right sleeve is a couple of inches longer than the left." The salesman replied, "Well, all right, that's no problem. Just kind of hike it up under your armpit here, hold your arm like this, keep your shoulders hunched, and you know, then it looks okay." The man looked down, and he said, "But the pants are too long. The pants are way too long." The salesman said, "Well, that's no problem. Just lean over like this, and it's going to be fine." The man was walking out of the store, hunched over with his arm up, and leaning over, and he saw a couple of ladies, and the lady said, "Look at that man! Would you just look at that man! What is wrong with him?" The other lady said, "I don't know, but don't his suit fit nice?"

Now, the only reason I told that is this story starts out with a woman who is bent over, and she ends up walking up straight and rejoicing, and that story has a man walking in straight and fine, and ends up walking out hunched over. Beyond that, it really doesn't fit. I thought it was worthwhile.

We've spent a lot of time in our culture working on externals, and it could be suits or dresses or clothing or houses or careers or what have you, cars. As a pastor, I have learned that what lives beneath in the human heart is often so desperately disparate from what we show on the outside that I scarcely pay attention to externals anymore. Our lives on the inside where only God knows get so contorted and so twisted in so many ways!

True story. I heard about a man who went to a business dinner with a colleague and after the dinner, he politely refused dessert. His friend made some casual comment. He said, "Oh, you're watching your waistline!" The guy said, "Well, yes, but it's more than that." He proceeded to tell how when he was a child, he was very chubby. He was always overweight. It got him the nickname "Lard." Some of us have known people by that

name. I knew a man in Rock Hill that they called “Lard.” I can’t believe people enjoy that. Well, it stuck with him all the way through high school. When this man finally left for college, a different community and a different set of friends, he vowed that no one would ever have reason to call him “Lard” again. No more would he ever have to live through that humiliation. The very name that people called him was one of ridicule and derision. He fiercely, fiercely watched his diet and his weight, and he guarded against that old name, “Lard.”

Sometimes, something as simple as a nickname can become a label that pulls us down and humiliates us under a load of disrespect and scorn, and it can be a weight that we carry around for years and years. Now, one advantage of moving away from home and going someplace new is that people don’t know your labels, and you can have a fresh start.

The bent over woman, whose name we don’t know. We just know her, and people knew her apparently in that town as the bent over woman. For 18 years, that’s what she had been. She did not have to leave town. Jesus gave that woman in the story right there and then a new beginning. She was able to start over and stay put right where she was as a new, joyful, and hope-filled person. For some folks, that heavy burden that stoops us over can be a chronic illness or pain. In a situation like that, it can be so easy to become completely absorbed in your pain and suffering so that there’s hardly any light left over. It can also be emotional and spiritual brokenness. It can be financial brokenness. You begin to define yourself not as a person anymore, but by your problem, by fat or infirm or poor or disturbed or afflicted, no longer the person you once were. The disease and the disorder loom so large that you can’t see the end of the tunnel so you assume that you just have to live your whole life in the tunnel, in the dark. But God always provides ways up and out and beyond what you think your limits are and what you think will always hold you down.

In the simplest terms, this Gospel story is a story of a reversal. So many stories of Jesus and encounters with Jesus are complete reversals. This nameless woman started bent over, downcast with disease, and she ended up standing straight up, eye-to-eye joyful. Then the religious leaders started out standing proud and proper over ritual law and pointing down at Jesus, saying, “How dare you break the Sabbath!” Standing tall they were, but at the end, they were bent over, looking down, the Scripture says, in shame. In shame.

She was bent, broken, afflicted, nameless, and there in the crowd, suddenly she was healed. She was free. She was rejoicing. All the religious leaders noticed. Imagine, of all the things to notice, what they noticed was the day upon which it happened. They said, “How dare you heal on the Sabbath! Jesus, we see that you can heal and set people free, and she’s afflicted, but she’s been afflicted for 18 years! Couldn’t she be afflicted for one more day? Couldn’t you wait until the Sabbath was over?”

You know, many of us did grow up, I guess it's become a generational thing; many of us grew up where there were pretty extreme boundaries around the Sabbath. No movies! No concerts! Some of us no dating! No fishing! If you didn't go to church, and you didn't have a good reason, no playing outside! You can't go to church, you can't go play! Anybody? Is that familiar to anyone? I mean, you know, it was pretty extreme. Do you know folks like 40, 30 and under, they don't even know what I'm talking about. It's a different; it's a whole different generation, a different mindset.

Back then, the way they viewed the Sabbath was pretty extreme, and they thought that it was a bad thing, and they were angry with Jesus ostensibly for breaking the Sabbath. If there was a fault there, it was not the woman's fault. The truth is she didn't even ask to be healed. Jesus saw her. Jesus called her. Jesus spoke to her a word of freedom, touched her, and healed her. He used the Holy Sabbath day to do a holy thing. He set free a woman, who was oppressed spiritually and physically. If you read carefully, she was oppressed in two ways. In an instant, she was upright and praising God!

Now, I know that some of you, and some of our membership have some intellectual problems with all the healings and the miracles in the Bible and the talk about people being spiritually oppressed by Satan, but because the Bible is the only place we learn of God's love in Jesus Christ, and because the Bible is the only place we hear of the God who wishes healing and wholeness and forgiveness and grace for us, and because the Bible is the only place that speaks of the love of a God, who comes to us because there's no way on our own that we could go to Him, because of these things, I take the healings and the mentions of spiritual oppression along with the good.

I was a student of science in college, but coin a phrase, I am no scientific fundamentalist. I am open to there being more unknown than known in the universe. What I know of God's love from this Bible is more than enough to make up for any intellectual unease caused by miraculous healings and spiritual oppression. I say all of this to say that the undercurrent of the story is that this woman was physically afflicted, but also spiritually afflicted. Jesus does not use the word healed in this passage. You look carefully; only Jesus' opponents use the word "heal." Jesus uses the word "set free." His analogy was the untying of the animals to give them water on the Sabbath, to give them what they needed. Reading the story as it is given to us, we find her bound and broken physically and spiritually, downcast and tied up, hopeless and bound for 18 years, and Jesus sets her free.

That language speaks to me. I have, and I think all of us on some level, on some instance, on some point, have felt bound by old problems and old infirmities of soul or body. Sometimes we let old, old wounds bend us and break us in places in our souls, and let those old wounds define whom we are so that we become the disease and no longer a whole person. We lose our name, our personhood, and our personality. We become the problem. We become the wound. We are stuck downcast somewhere in the past; somewhere back in the past, no longer even dreaming of a future. That's oppression.

Have you noticed before in reading this passage; have you noticed before that the nameless woman defined by her disorder had never asked to be healed? You find other folks who asked to be healed or sneak up behind Jesus and grab the hem of His garment, but this woman never spoke to Him, never called out to Him. He came to her in her downcast broken state, and He stood her up straight. On the Holy Sabbath, a holy thing happened! Her body was healed. Her broken heart and spirit were filled with joy. Surely that is the message for us today.

God can come into our lives and bring healing and wholeness even after we have given up, even after we have started to see ourselves as hopeless. God can touch us after we have defined ourselves by the pain, and God can redefine us as a child of God, and show us a whole new world, a whole new world out there that we could not see because we were looking down, looking just down.

Jesus called her a daughter of Abraham. He took away her nameless, disease-defined name, and gave her a new name, daughter of the Covenant, daughter of Abraham, daughter of God.

Some people carry a heavy load. It could be of debt. Week after week, month after month, they see their paycheck being absorbed by their never-ending debt. The debt may have been caused by unforeseen circumstances out of your control, or it may be because of undisciplined appetites or a desire to keep up with the Joneses. All of these are heavy burdens. Some folks carry around a heavy load of guilt. They've heard the words about forgiveness, but they have a very difficult time seeing themselves as valuable and worthy simply because they are convinced that they are terrible and awful people because of something they actually did or maybe because of not living up to unrealistic expectations of parents, parents who may still have a heavy influence on them even after they are dead. Some people carry the weight of seeing themselves as a victim. All their problems are caused by somebody else, and they spend time in spinning their wheels deciding whose fault this problem is. There's nothing they can do about it. Victims filled with despair.

The visual image of the bent over woman is a powerful picture where many people are today. Way too many of us are weighed down with the burdens and the cares and the worries of the world. Expectations other people put upon us, old guilt that we carry with interest into each day, financial problems, practical problems, unforgiveness, bitterness, and we wrongly define ourselves by these things instead of child of God. Instead we are bent, we are broken, we are downcast even though the world may not see it. The world may see us as wonderful people on the outside, and on the outside we may look that way, but too many inside are in some different ways bent and broken and downcast, desperately, desperately downcast. So we label ourselves, and then we get into the habit of labeling others as poor or pitiful or fat or slow or uneducated or a loser or unattractive or too old or a failure or no good or sick or all these things.

“Broken . . . Nameless . . . Healed
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, August 26, 2007

Jesus comes to us and makes us an offer that we never even dared ask for! He says, “You are set free! You can be set free! You are valuable and important and worthwhile to me. You are so important to me that I am willing to lay down my own life for your sake in order to lift you up and set you free!” Then Jesus gives us a new name, a new label. You’re no longer poor or fat or a failure or sick or pitiful or laden with guilt. You’re a child a God! As a follower, Christian, a Christian. Now, to be named Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ, a daughter or a son of God, there are some in our culture, an increasing number I believe, who deride that name and belittle that title, but from the inside, those of us who have felt the weight lifted and felt ourselves unbent and standing straight up, we know that it means one who has been lifted up. One who has been healed in heart and no longer determined to call ourselves names or to be cast down in our aspect. It means forgiveness. It means wholeness. It means to be set free from afflictions of the soul or attitudes, which bind us to the past.

The greatest thing of all is that it’s a gift! It is a gift. It is grace. Grace from God to us. God who noticed our downcast broken selves and calls us near to Him to be set free, to live upright, to be our true and best selves with peace and hope for ourselves and for others, for others. Thanks be to God, as it says in the Proverbs, thanks be to God, the God who heals the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit! God still heals the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Thanks be to God for our living hope. We need not stay stuck in the past. We need not stay stuck and bent over and downward looking. Christ is calling us to heal our broken hearts, to save our crushed spirits, to give us the name, child of God. Amen.