

August 25, 2013
Isaiah 58:9b-14
Luke 13:10-17

Stand up straight

When I was a kid, my mom was always after me to stand up straight.

“Mary, quit slouching. Mary, stop slumping. Mary, come on now. You are going to ruin our family picture. Now let’s see that Santa sweater.

Mary, stand up straight. Your great-grandmother had osteoporosis and she would have loved to have stood up straight.” But as a teenager who has time to have good posture. Who wants to stand up straight when a good slouch will do?

The woman in our reading today would have told me to stand up straight too. Because she would have stood up straight if she could. She was bent. Doubled over, like my great-gramma. Crippled, it was said, by a spirit, an evil one. All she knew was that she had lived in hell. And she had lived there for 18 years. Some Bible scholars suggest she had a spinal problem. Others a genetic disorder. Another thought is that maybe this woman was crippled by years and years of hard physical labor.

Which is very possible if she was poor and/or widowed. Maybe she was like the young girls today in Ethiopia who spend twelve hours a day

collecting firewood. Imagine a barefoot 10 year old carrying 75 pounds of branches on her back. Day in and day out. Carrying a bundle that will sell for \$2 at the market and feed her family for a few days. Imagine how that would affect her young back. How it might cripple her with pain for the rest of her life.

Imagine the woman in our story. And imagine what it is like to not be able to stand up straight. If you have ever had back trouble, then you know. If you live with arthritis. Or osteoporosis. Or degenerating discs. You know what it was like for this woman. The pain that doesn't go away. The pain that punishes you for every move. That makes it impossible to do anything because everything hurts. Who here has experienced with that?

When your back hurts, it's not just your back that hurts. Everything hurts. You can't do anything. You can't walk comfortably. You can't lie down comfortably. You can't eat, drink, or sleep comfortably. You can't sit comfortably. You can't go out and do something just for fun. You can't commit yourself to any activities, because you don't know if it will be a bad day for pain. If you are like this woman in our story, the spirit

crippling won't even let you stand up straight. You can't reach things. You can't climb stairs. You can't even raise your head to have a conversation. You are a subject of pity. And you are dependent and you hate it, you hate it. You hate being so squashed down, physically, socially, spiritually.

Life is hell. And yet, this woman, bent and stooped, comes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Painfully walking up each step. Shuffling to the back of the room. Hoping she can get things straight with God.

Hoping, wanting, needing to see this man Jesus.

She is bent over, hardly noticeable in the crowd. Hardly anyone sees her.

She is below their line of sight. But Jesus sees her. Of all the people in the crowd, he sees her. And he calls her over, and lays his hands on her, and he heals her. And for the first time in a long, long time, she stands up straight. Jesus frees her from her burden. Jesus releases her from the evil that held her down. Ought not this woman be set free? Yes, Jesus says. YES! This is a daughter of Abraham. This is a child of God. And she deserves health and life and a chance to stand up straight! And she deserves it right now.

Ought not this woman be set free? Without consulting any Biblical commentaries or asking any scholars or looking anything up on Wikipedia, I think we can answer Jesus' question. Ought not this woman be set free? Yes. Yes, of course, she should, Jesus. She ought to be set free. Without question, she ought to be able to stand up straight. There is no doubt in our minds. Get rid of that horrible crippling spirit. But the synagogue leader in our story says no. He says no to setting this woman free. Because it was the Sabbath. And according to the law, no work should be done on the Sabbath. No, he says. Jesus shouldn't have done it. He shouldn't have healed her. Not in this synagogue. Not on this day. There are six other days it could have been done. One of those days would have been fine. But not the Sabbath. No, Jesus, no. You shouldn't have helped that woman stand up straight.

It's hard to believe he could think that. It's hard to believe that the synagogue leader could look at the woman who used to be bent over in pain and who is now dancing down the aisles and say that she should still be bent over in pain. It's hard to believe that he could believe that. Just look at her. Dancing. Just look at her. Free from that strangulating

spirit. Free from what had bent her down so far for so long. Just look at her. After 18 years, she can finally stand up straight and tall and proud and take a deep breath and dance. And that's what Jesus came to do. To release the captives and free the oppressed. And to do it right now. Not tomorrow. Not some other day. Not to promise freedom in another life. But to give it right now. Today. On the Sabbath. Because the Sabbath is a standing-up-straight day.

That's what the Sabbath should be about. It should be the day we are freed from our burdens. The day we can unbend our backs and stand up straight. When we can drop all the strain and toil and suffering from our shoulders. That's what it's for. That's what God planned when God planned for us to take a Sabbath day of rest. That's why God made it part of the Ten Commandments. So it would counteract the forced labor of the world. The living hell of backs bent by never-ending work. It was a commandment put in place right after Israel had come out of Egypt. You remember Egypt. Where Pharaoh demanded non-stop labor from the Israelites. Where they had worked day in and day out. And the

weight of it bent their bodies and crushed their spirits. And that was not what God intended. Not for any human being.

So God commanded a day of rest. No work. Not for you. Not for your laborers or your servants. No one should be bound to non-stop labor. No one is meant to live in a permanent hell of toil. Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Take off the yoke and stand up straight.

Today, in our lives, we'd like to be unburdened. Even for a day. But it seems impossible. Here we are again, in this day and age, working 24/7.

With no escape from the emails and phone calls and the schedules and the meetings and the tournaments. Working long hours. Working more than one job to make ends meet. There is no day of rest. Especially for the poor. It's slavery under Pharaoh all over again. Which is what the synagogue leader was trying to remind them of. It's why he is so opposed to what Jesus is doing. Jesus is working on the Sabbath. He is breaking God's commandment to rest. If you make one exception for working on the Sabbath, then you have to make another. And another and soon the Sabbath is just another day of work like any other. The synagogue leader, in his own way, is just trying to protect us from that.

But God's desire is for us to stand up straight. To be free of what squashes the life from us. To be free from the demands of work. Free from the burdens that weigh us down and bend us so low that we can't even look up. Free from what cripples our hearts and dehumanizes our neighbors. God wants us to be able to stand up straight. And that's what Jesus wanted too. That's what he still wants.

Jesus wants freedom for the those bent low by life and he sees and seeks out all who are bound and bent. Physically, socially, spiritually. Jesus has come to help the world stand up straight. And we as his church are called to be part of that. Our own denomination, the PCUSA is trying to see with the eyes of Jesus. And notice those whose backs are bent by hard labor. It has entered into a partnership with the Coalition of Immokalee Workers. A group of tomato pickers in Florida demanding humane working conditions. A one penny per pound increase in wages. A time clock to fairly track their hours. Shade stations, toilets, drinking water, freedom from sexual harassment. Simple things we would expect, but simply not available to everyone. Silvia Perez remembers being harassed by supervisors who wanted her to dress differently and show

off her body. "They insisted that I wear sexy clothing," she said. "If I wore anything baggy, they'd say 'Why are you wearing that? That doesn't fit you.' They'd compare my body to other women's bodies. She said she was humiliated by their requests and she had no way to voice her concerns. It was something female workers simply had to put up with or risk losing their jobs.¹ So the church joined with the workers and asked: Ought not these women be free from harassment? Ought not those who work long hours be given relief? Ought not our neighbors be able to stand up straight? And be respected as children of God? All those bent down under heavy loads, crippled by dark forces, physically, spiritually, emotionally; ought not they be set free? Jesus says yes! 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? Remove the yoke from among you, says Isaiah. And your light shall shine in the darkness. Call the Sabbath a delight and the Day of the Lord honorable. Proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free. Our God will never stop lifting up the ones who are bent down. By injustice. Or slavery. Or

¹ <http://www.tampabay.com/news/business/agriculture/immokalee-tomato-pickers-continue-march-through-tampa/2108725>

hunger. Or homelessness. Our God will never stop trying to set us free.

Ought not God's people be able to stand up straight?

And ought not you be able to stand up straight? Ought not you be set free? Maybe you are like the woman in the story. Maybe you are bound

or crippled by something. Maybe it's work. Maybe it's a relationship.

Maybe it's a punishing physical problem. Maybe it's something no one

can see. And you've been weighed down by it. And it presses on you

with such force that you can't stand, you can't even lift your head. And

what if Jesus saw you bent under this burden? And what if Jesus were

able to take it away and set you free? Because Jesus wants you to be

free. Jesus wants you to have life. Full, abundant life. Not half a life or

part of a life. Not a life in which you are enslaved. Not a life in which

you are in bondage to work or to achievement or to everyone else's

opinions of you. Not a life in which you are crippled by self-doubt and

worry. Not a life in which you are unable to stand up straight because of

all the demands and requirements placed on you that have nothing to do

with God's Kingdom. Jesus wants to get rid of all of that. Today. Right

now. On this Sabbath. Jesus wants to set you free. Beloved child of God.

You are not bound by the powers of darkness any more. Today is the Lord's day. Breathe in. Breathe out. Stand up straight. This is your Sabbath. Ought not you be set free? Ought not everyone have the chance to be set free, to stand up straight and tall in the love of God?