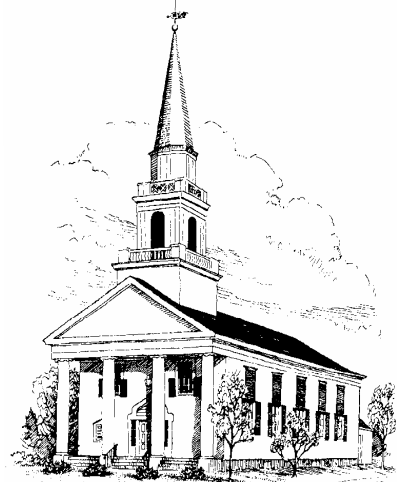


Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from August 26, 2007
Rev. Barbara J. Libby
“Bent Out of Shape”

Scriptures:
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17



In our lesson from Luke, we have a simple enough story on first glance, don't we? On the way to Jerusalem, while Jesus is teaching in a synagogue one Sabbath day, a “bent-over” woman appears in the congregation. The story does not indicate that the woman even asks Jesus for healing, yet this woman evokes Jesus' compassion.

Jesus sees a person in need and, even though it's the Sabbath (when healing non-life-threatening conditions is not permitted), he calls her over to him and sets her free from the spirit that has ailed her for eighteen long years. Simply by placing his hands on her, just as one might do in blessing, the woman is indeed blessed and is immediately freed so she can stand up straight. She seems to recognize immediately the source of the freedom she's been given for she immediately begins to praise God. At last, freedom from a bent-out-of-shape position she's been limited to for so many years! At last, freedom from whatever has held her bent over for so long! At last, freedom from all that has held her down and even held her back for nearly twenty years!

But is everyone amazed and grateful to witness such a thing? No, indeed. The leader of the synagogue is upset by this breach of the Sabbath law. He tells the crowd that they should plan to come back on another day of the week for healing, when the time is more “appropriate” for such things. And Jesus does not miss this opportunity to call into question the hypocrisy of the leader's views. Jesus presses the point with the religious leader—*Why shouldn't it be a good thing for healing to occur on this day? Why shouldn't a woman bound for eighteen long years be freed from her bondage?* The tension builds. His opponents are shamed. The crowd rejoices in the things that Jesus is doing. And Jesus continues to head toward Jerusalem on his long journey towards an early death, for just such breaks with tradition and norm.

A simple enough story, it would seem. But, as in all biblical narratives, there is so much more to see and more to ponder as Jesus' disciples and we are invited to consider what Jesus was hoping to reveal and model by this liberating healing—a simple enough story and one that invites us to grow our faith.

As always, when we consider the setting of the story and its parallels with other stories, we begin to recognize even more of its power and its meaning. This isn't the only time Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. This isn't the only time Jesus has healed while teaching in the syna-

gogue. It isn't the first time Jesus has provoked the religious leaders and it certainly won't be the last time he does so on his short time of ministry on the way to Jerusalem.

Jesus sees a woman in the synagogue that day whose life has bent her so far out of shape that she is no longer able to stand up straight. He sees a woman not able to see where she's going on her journey. He sees a woman unable to make eye contact easily with the others in the congregation, those on the street, and even those in her own household. Jesus doesn't say, "You are cured," to the woman in the synagogue. Jesus says, "You are set free."

After the leader's initial protest about Sabbath healing, Jesus calls the leaders on the supposed abstinence from work on the Sabbath reminding them that there are always tasks to be done, even on a Sabbath, that require some effort. Then Jesus reveals that he knows that this woman has been bound by Satan for all these eighteen years. Jesus is suggesting that there is another level of order to this matter. This woman needs to be set free from an evil force, a malevolent force, something "not right" in the woman's life that has kept her bound up, bent over, "tied up", and restrained for years.

Jesus is pointing to another level of order here. This isn't just about whether to heal on the Sabbath day or not. Rather, this is a matter of addressing something in the fabric of things that has gone awry. Jesus is calling attention to a tear in the social system somewhere, something evil in the attitudes or practices of the day, something evil in this woman's life story that had been keeping her bound up for years.

This simple "setting free" that Jesus does here is not just about this woman. This story pushes the congregation of the first century and this congregation of the twenty-first century to consider why so many women and men are still living lives "bent over"—physically, spiritually, and emotionally bent out of shape. This story pushes us to consider our own experiences of bent-over-ness.

We can only guess at the things that could have bent this woman over so much. She could have suffered at the hands of an abusive spouse. She could have been trapped in a loveless marriage. She could have been trapped by cultural expectations. She could have been the identified patient in an unhealthy family system. She could have become addicted to some behavior or substance that had destroyed her ability to face all that life had to offer her.

What we do know is that Jesus recognized a woman in need of release, a woman in need of freedom from whatever ailed her, a woman whose life had been so "bent out of shape" that even her body had become bent out of shape. Jesus demonstrated that he could offer her freedom from that previous life. Jesus demonstrated over and over again that he could provide whatever special kind of healing people needed. Jesus demonstrated that the love of God through him could free each of us from whatever weighs us down, whatever stoops us over, whatever binds us and keeps us bent out of shape.

What are the issues or challenges in your life that contort you? What's happening in your life that prevents you from being the whole person you want to be? Are there things that weigh you down and prevent you from seeing what's ahead of you? Are there pains or addic-

tions or mistakes or “baggage” from your past that are preventing you from living a full and free life? Is there an imbalance in your work and leisure time? Are you spending enough time with those you love? Is there an imbalance in your life somewhere? Has work become your “drug” of choice?

The love of God can set us free. The love of God through Christ, can liberate us to live a new life. God offer us the possibility of that healing touch. God can release us from the sickness of our past. God can unbind our troubled minds, bodies and spirits so that we can, with God’s help, turn our lives around.

God offers us that same gift of freedom that Jesus offered to this woman in our story today. God offers us a gift to be able to stand up straight in spite of all that might weigh us down and threaten to overtake us. God wants us to look into the faces of those around us. God wants us to look up and out towards the rising sun and our future. God offers us the opportunity to become the whole persons we are meant to be. We are called to be whole persons. We are called to be free.

God’s grace is there and it can come to us, even when we may not have the strength or the confidence to ask for it. And, like the woman in our story for today, let us not forget to praise the God from whom all blessings flow! Amen.

