



ST. MICHAEL'S SERMONS

Greenville, SC

August 26, 2007

Luke 13:10-17

Vicar Elise Stringer

"Bent Out of Shape"

"And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and quiet unable to stand up straight."

I remember it like it was just yesterday...it was a cool November night as I walked into Wednesday night Bible study, bundled in my jacket, books in hand. I opened the door downstairs near the green room and scurried in to keep the cold out. As I rounded the corner I could hear the laughter of a familiar voice, I smiled as I thought to myself, "I wonder what he's got for me tonight?" Because this man I'm thinking of is always full of funnies. We sat chatting for a bit and then it just started to roll right out of him, even with his sweet and gentle wife nudging him to stop teasing me.

And of course I was teasing right back. In an attempt at a snappy comeback I made a quick bald joke and stood up to give myself a pat on the back, and high fives to those seated nearby. As I stood there laughing hysterically at my own joke, the wheels began turning in his mind about how to fire back at me. And he did. "Hey Mini-Vicar if you're gonna tell a joke like that, you should at least stand up to do it!" Ahahahaha. Stand up, I thought, I'm already standing. Duh Elise, that was the joke! You're so short that even when you're standing, it looks as if you're still sitting down. Then I laughed along because, I must admit, it was pretty funny! And of course that was not the only time I heard that joke during this year.

Now in today's Gospel lesson we hear a story of a woman who truly was bent over and unable to stand up straight. No short jokes involved. But as Luke tells us, it was the woman's spirit that had her crippled and bent out of shape for 18 long years. Luke does not say the woman had a crippling disease or an ailment but instead a crippling spirit. ***Her spirit had her "bent out of shape."***

Imagine that, being bent over for 18 years, staring at the ground, unable to make eye contact with those around you, unable to be an active and engaged part of the world in which you live. Imagine being trapped for 18 years by the stereotype society has placed on you—bent and broken, crooked and captive.

But in some way or another we are all held captive by the stereotypes society places on us: bent and broken, weird and misshapen, awkward and misunderstood, rich or poor, short or tall, fat or skinny. Often we feel as though our lives are defined by what others say about us or the names they give us. And we too can limit and define someone by the names we give them.

These days it seems as if everyone has a nickname. Sometimes they're names we like, names we feel good about, and sometimes they're names that limit who God has created us to be. Have you even been given a nickname? Maybe one you loved or one you really didn't like?

Well throughout this year I have lovingly been called by many names: all of which I consider "terms of endearment." Mini-Vicar, Peep, Para-Parson, Para-Pastor, Illegal Midget, Little Bit, Yoda, Shorty #2 (because Nancy is #1), VE and many more I'm sure you all could name.

Jeffrey has even been given a nickname, VHS, or Vicar Husband Stringer. I myself have given a few people some nicknames this year: Pastor Robert is often known as "Big Dawg or Boss." I call Linda the "Fairy Godmother", because she makes things magically appear. I have come to know Howard Leonard as HOW WEIRD, there's also been a JRock, Mama T, Sparkle, Cous', ARiddy & Su Rah! I'm sure there are others. All have been created with great love and appreciation of course.

So do you have a nickname? Something a loved one calls you, something that makes you feel loved, special and included? ***Those are the kinds of nicknames that encourage the person God has created us to be, a beloved child, created in His image.***

In today's Gospel reading the woman in the story doesn't have a name, other than the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability- "the bent over woman." She doesn't have an identity other than that of a woman with a hunched back; to some her face has never even been seen.

It appears as though she doesn't have a family or an occupation, nothing other than her deformity. She is the one who is bent, stooped and crippled, bearing upon her shoulders an invisible yet obviously heavy burden, the burden of being different, the burden of not looking like everyone else, the burden of not being able to do what everyone else does, the burden of not only a physical ailment but a spiritual one too. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman, the one whom Satan has bound.

As I read this text over and over I began to imagine that this woman, all bent out of shape, embodies within herself the brokenness, the sadness and the pain of all the people in her day who were ostracized, mocked for being different, ignored and thrown away. She came to that synagogue bearing the load for all, "the town drunk, the lonely widow, the deaf and dumb, the blind, the slow, the orphan, the slave and so many more."

Although mocked, despised and cast out, she came, hunched over to the synagogue to see Jesus, probably to seek help for her crooked back, but more importantly to be seen and accepted, to have her spiritual crippling undone.

We could probably all imagine a time in our life when we felt like the woman in this story, all bent out of shape, maybe even ostracized, mocked and ignored as she was.

When I was a teenager I could be a bit of a drama queen.

Aren't all teenage girls drama queens? My parents in an attempt to calm the storm would say, "Elise, don't get so 'bent out of shape,' it'll be fine." Well in those days the things that got me bent out of shape were boys, hair and clothes.

In this Gospel lesson we have a bit of a different meaning for being bent, it's not only just back problem or a physical deformity, but a spiritual crippling as well. We aren't sure why/how, but for one reason or another she's been bound by Satan for 18 long years.

So what gets us bent out of shape and cripples our spirit?

Maybe it's loneliness, or our inability to reach out to those around us for fear of rejection, hurt or judgment. Maybe it's our jealousy of those who seem to have it all, our desire to want more than we need- to grow rich, popular and powerful.

Maybe it's our judgment of others, those who are different than we are, those who live on the other side of the tracks or those who don't see things the way we do. Maybe it's our constant need to complain, to nit pick and find something wrong with everything, or our lack of appreciation for all the good and wonderful things God has done, is doing or promises yet to do in each of our lives. Or maybe it's feeling like we aren't good enough, like we can never do anything right, like no one will ever accept us the way we are.

Whatever the cause may be, the reality is that each of us is broken, bent and crippled in some way, whether physically, mentally, spiritually, or emotionally. There is something in each of our lives that cripples us and has us bent out of shape. But the Good News is that God doesn't leave us that way forever. He sends us His son to redeem us from our pain, to forgive our sins, to heal us from our brokenness and make us whole again.

"But when Jesus saw the woman, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.'"

Jesus doesn't wait for her to find Him, but rather, at the moment he sees her, He calls her to come to Him, touching and healing her of her bent body. Curing her of her crippling spirit so that she may stand straight and tall, no longer bent out of shape. He too calls out to us.

Jesus met her where she was, in the midst of her spiritual sickness, in the depths of her physical brokenness, in the pain of her exclusion from society, and He healed her.

Now many in the synagogue that day were very unhappy with Jesus' decision to heal on the Sabbath. "The leader of the synagogue said, ***"there are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath."***

Jesus quickly responds, ***"You hypocrites! 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? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath?"***

Praise God, Jesus works 24/7! There are no legalistic ancient calendars that can dictate when and where Jesus will do the work of His Father in heaven. There are no Sabbath rules that set parameters for Jesus' love and forgiveness, for His healing and redemptive powers. The woman needed help and it just so happens it was on the Sabbath, so Jesus helped her. He didn't pull out his date book and ask her to return at a better time, although the leaders of the synagogue expected Him to. He welcomed her then.

But as Christians, children of the crucified and risen Christ, we know our Lord doesn't do the expected, He doesn't play by the rules of hypocrites, He doesn't conform to society's standards.

Jesus didn't ignore the woman who was bent over, as if she would just disappear. He didn't call her by the name society had given her; instead He called out to her, touched her, healed her and made her part of the community. He welcomed her in His name, when He called her a daughter of Abraham, an heir to God's promise.

Today as we accept new members of St. Michael Lutheran Church we are living out Christ's call and challenge given to us in this text about the bent woman, to be inclusive, to love one another, to pay more attention to the needs of those around us than to our own needs.

We are welcoming these people in the name of the one who welcomes us all, who loves, forgives and heals us unconditionally. And we're willing and able to do it because God in Christ Jesus, through the Word, the Water and the Table has strengthened and encouraged us to.

Here today, in this very place, on the Sabbath day, Jesus also comes to us, meets us where we are, opens wide His arms and calls out to us, "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will set you free and I will give you the strength to go forward and do likewise."

The Lord and God of all, the one who created the heavens and the earth, the one who rolled the stone away, calls us each by name, beloved child of God, heirs of His promise and blessing. The King of Israel lays His hands upon us, wiping away the sin that binds and cripples us, setting us free from stereotypes that have us "bent out of shape," healing and restoring us to new life!

We serve a radical God- A God who sent His only son to live and to die so that we may have life, and have it abundantly. Because we serve such a radical and loving God we are not defined by society's titles, we are not bound forever by the burden of our sins.

Jesus didn't call the woman cripple, bent or sick, as to allow her disability to define her entire life, and he doesn't call us selfish, broken and sorry, as to allow sin and shame to define our lives.

We, just like the woman in Luke's Gospel, are healed, set free to live and love, to be loved and forgiven, transformed by God to serve and to stand up straight and praise Him all the days of our life!

"When Jesus said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that He was doing."

Let us go forth rejoicing that Jesus Christ is doing wonderful and amazing things in all our lives, individually and as the body of Christ gathered at St. Michael's. There is no need to stay bent out of shape, for Jesus the Christ has set us free to stand up straight and praise Him! ***Thanks be to God. Amen.***