

January 22, 2017 BUCYRUS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

“THE BENT OVER WOMAN”

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Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

One thing the gospels make very clear is that Jesus had a profound influence on people. People of all kinds who encountered him were never the same again.

This incident recorded in Luke is one such instance. A woman who had had an infirmity for eighteen years was seen and touched and healed by Jesus. According to this account, that's all there was to their encounter. But I don't think so. In writing this, Luke was so concerned to make the point that Jesus was a healer that he simply cut to the chase and didn't go into detail.

But we know from other reports of Jesus' healing episodes that Jesus did much more than that. The report says that Jesus "saw her." My hunch is that Jesus didn't just "see" her; he looked at her, deep into her, with compassion.

This woman was so ill with her infirmity that she couldn't even stand up straight. One can only guess what had gone on in this woman's life to cause her to be so misshapen and that was Jesus' concern. So he looked at her in such a way as to embrace her whole life and being.

Jesus knew what modern medical science has discovered--that one's physical condition is often affected by one's emotional state, perhaps even one's moral state. One can conjecture that this woman was abused, physically and mentally. Perhaps her self-esteem was so damaged by eighteen years of being put down, undervalued, and ridiculed that she no doubt felt she didn't deserve to stand tall. After all, she didn't feel she could ask Jesus to heal her. He was the one who made the first move.

The way Jesus looked at her and put his hand on her communicated the message that Jesus spent his entire ministry to convey--that God loves exactly who she is and she is worth infinitely more than her associates had ever communicated to her.

That brought about a change in this woman. Her infirmity was healed and "immediately she was made straight." But she was more than changed--she was transformed! She had become a new woman, or more precisely, she had become the woman (God) created her to be in the first place.

There is a degree to which her story, I suspect, is our story. Most of us, if not all of us, have heard messages about ourselves, have endured actions and attitudes toward ourselves that hurt us badly and caused us physically and mentally to stoop our shoulders, be disappointed in ourselves, perhaps even lose hope in our possibilities. We are in need of that same healing power, and it is as available to us as it was to her.

It's because of Jesus that I know God to be a God who not only loves me beyond measure but believes in me, believes in my capacity to become the person God created me to be. And that is true of every single person on this earth, including you. Opening ourselves to the loving gaze and healing touch of Jesus helps that message to come through to us. No matter who we are or where we are in our lives, we

need not just some changes, we need a transformation, becoming a new being, which doesn't mean becoming someone we're not, but becoming who we genuinely are. As Peanuts' creator Charles Schultz said, "Life is like a ten-speed bike. Most of us have gears we haven't even used yet."

Now it's ironic that in this gospel report the very next thing that happened, after this woman's saving, transforming experience, is that Jesus was condemned for doing what he did. Why? Because it was the Sabbath day and that was the kind of work that should have been postponed until a weekday. Jesus responded quickly, noting that any of those present would surely have untied an animal and led it to water on the Sabbath day, and why wasn't this woman's life of even greater value?

Jesus was not into sin management, nor did he call his disciples to be. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to find any place in the gospels where Jesus called anyone a sinner. He called people foolish plenty of times. When Jesus criticized people for foolish or sinful behavior, it was in much the same way that a physician might evaluate a cancer patient. He wouldn't say, "You're a bad person." He would say, "You're a good person with a bad disease, and you need treatment." Jesus never lost sight of the essential, created goodness in everyone, but he was aware of how that essential goodness easily becomes contaminated by the selfish defiance of God's will. People in that state of "ill health" needed treatment. They needed transformation.

Our sinfulness, our behaviors that are disappointing to God, our actions that are a violation of God's intended creation of us is never the last word. It's meant to be the next-to-last word and we are called to claim that last word of forgiving grace by means, first, of acknowledging the next-to-last word in our life, repenting of it, which means turning around and receiving the transforming, restoring grace of God. God offers that to us in every moment. The next move is always ours.

Jesus' objective was to call people to a new vision of the way things ought to be with themselves and with the world. He called it the Kingdom of God and he said it is "at hand," "within you," "in your midst." The only thing standing between you and its final arrival is your need for transformation.

Now, if you have a bunch of untransformed people together, you have an untransformed society, and it doesn't take many reads of a newspaper or viewing of TV news to see how radically our society is in need of transformation, needing not just some changes here and there but transformation. A nation like ours--the wealthiest in all history, where one-fifth of our children don't have enough to eat--is in need of a moral transformation. A nation like ours--capable not only of solving our own social problems but easing the pains of much of the rest of the world as well, but where the desire for profits supersedes the desire to help--we are a nation in need of a moral transformation.

Jesus Christ has marvelous transforming power. There seem to be more people who believe that Jesus changed water into wine than who believe Jesus can change people into better people.

Like that woman, Jesus sees us and longs to touch us and heal us and make us who God created us to be.