

**“CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD”****Rev. Becky Stephens****Text: Luke 13:10-17 NLT****God's Word: Matthew 11:28-30 NLT*****Luke 13:10-17 NLT***

*<sup>10</sup> One Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, <sup>11</sup> he saw a woman who had been crippled by an evil spirit. She had been bent double for eighteen years and was unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Dear woman, you are healed of your sickness!” <sup>13</sup> Then he touched her, and instantly she could stand straight. How she praised God! <sup>14</sup> But the leader in charge of the synagogue was indignant that Jesus had healed her on the Sabbath day. “There are six days of the week for working,” he said to the crowd. “Come on those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord replied, “You hypocrites! Each of you works on the Sabbath day! Don’t you untie your ox or your donkey from its stall on the Sabbath and lead it out for water? <sup>16</sup> This dear woman, a daughter of Abraham, has been held in bondage by Satan for eighteen years. Isn’t it right that she be released, even on the Sabbath?” <sup>17</sup> This shamed his enemies, but all the people rejoiced at the wonderful things he did.*

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In his book, *When a Nation Forgets*, Erwin Lutzer retells one Christian’s story about living in Hitler’s Germany. The man wrote:

*I lived in Germany during the Nazi Holocaust. I considered myself a Christian. We heard stories of what was happening to the Jews, but we tried to distance ourselves from it, because what could anyone do to stop it? A railroad track ran behind our small church, and each Sunday morning we could hear the whistle in the distance and then the wheels coming over the tracks. We became disturbed when we heard the cries coming from the train as it passed by. We realized that it was carrying Jews like cattle in the cars! Week after week the whistle would blow. We dreaded to hear the sound of those wheels because we knew that we would hear the cries of the Jews in route to a death camp. Their screams tormented us. We knew the time the train was coming, and when we heard the whistle blow we began singing hymns. By the time the train came past our church, we were singing at the top of our voices. If we heard the screams, we sang more loudly and soon we heard them no more. Years have passed, and no one talks about it anymore. But I still hear that train whistle in my sleep. God forgive me; forgive all of us who called ourselves Christians yet did nothing to intervene.*

William Wilberforce once wrote, “In the Scripture, no national crime is condemned so frequently and few so strongly as oppression and cruelty, and not using our best endeavors to deliver our fellow-creatures from them.”

Our Scripture Passage for this morning is a story of restoration and health, in the face of a system that seems bound and determined to keep oppressed people where they are. The woman in the story was probably well-known in her village where everyone’s life was public. And everyone in town knew how long she had not been able to straighten-up her body.

We are told that she had been “disabled by a spirit for eighteen years.” Many today think that her disability came from psychological causes. Maybe somebody or a whole group of somebody’s had persistently abused her, verbally or physically, when she was younger, until her twisted up emotions communicated themselves to her body, and she found that she couldn’t get straight. It’s been noted that even after all the medical advances of the last few hundred years, the medical community is very much aware that the same thing can happen today without any other apparent cause.

Have you ever been bent over from the pressures of life? Have you ever felt so low about yourself that all you could muster-up the strength to do was to look at your feet on the ground? Perhaps you feel that way now. Or, maybe, you know someone else who feels that way.

The pressures of this world can take a toll on the psyche. Excessive worrying can weigh heavily on us. Sometimes the most crippling disabilities are those of the spirit...the doubts and insecurities that keep us paralyzed, unable to act, that prevent us from realizing our fullest potential as God-created and God-loved beings. Guilt can also cause backs to bend. As can poverty.

Whatever the cause of her low self-esteem, the woman in our Scripture passage couldn’t straighten her body. So she couldn’t look upwards or forwards. She could only see the dirt at her feet.

One Sabbath day she went to the synagogue, and in all likelihood, she was doing nothing whatsoever to attract attention to herself. She probably slipped in through the side door, quietly, unobtrusively. Jesus was teaching the people, and then He looked off to one side, or up in the balcony and saw that woman come in with her peculiar, crippled walk. And Jesus stopped what He was doing.

It’s interesting. Jesus always notices those on the margins. Jesus always notices the cast-aways. He always has time for the downtrodden, those hated by society, the judged, the “bent over” people. And as Christians, and as the Church of Jesus Christ, it is our job to notice and care for these people as well. And so Jesus called this woman into the center of the synagogue.

And this was an extremely unusual thing for a male religious leader to do in Jesus’ day. Women usually stayed off to the side and out of sight. Jesus must have gone and led her by the hand to

the center of the room. Jesus told the woman that she was free from whatever had twisted up her body. He put His hand on her, and immediately she was able to straighten up. She could finally look upwards to God for inspiration, and she could see forwards to the possibilities of life. The bent over woman in the Scripture had lived with her hurt for a long time.

We might expect that the religious rulers would be happy that Jesus was able to help her. But that isn't what happened. Instead, we are told that "the synagogue leader was incensed that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath."

Can you imagine what was going through the woman's head? When she could finally straighten up her back, what she saw must have been clear: the religious institution was bent over and suffering under the weight of its own laws. And if it weren't for Jesus being at her side, she may have just gone right back to being bent over!!! And wouldn't we all?

Jesus called the religious authorities "Hypocrites!" As a matter of fact, throughout the Gospels, the only persons whom Jesus condemned were the religious people. In Matthew Chapter 23 Jesus said that the religious leaders of His day *"tie together heavy packs that are impossible to carry. They put them on the shoulders of others, but are unwilling to lift a finger to move them."* He said, *"How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You shut people out of the kingdom of heaven. You don't enter yourselves, and you won't allow those who want to enter to do so. How terrible it will be for you, legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You travel over sea and land to make one convert. But when they've been converted, they become twice the child of hell you are."* Jesus goes on and on and on...but you get the point.

So Jesus says to the religious folk who are angry at Jesus for breaking the Sabbath Law that love and taking care of other people trumps the Law every time. Praise God. We have a flexible Savior!!! It doesn't appear that Jesus is a literalist. He leaves some room for interpretation.

That's something like what John Wesley, the Founder of Methodism, taught when he said we are to use "Reason" when interpreting Scripture. *"Isn't it necessary that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, bound by Satan for eighteen long years, be set free from her bondage on the Sabbath day,"* Jesus asks.

Jesus says this woman is a daughter of Abraham, and she's been tied up by Satan, the very one who has the whole religious system in his grip. And what Jesus has done for this woman is what Jesus longs to do for Israel as a whole. The enemy has had Israel in his power for many years, and Jesus is the Only One Who can free them. But the religious leaders' insistence on rigid laws and following them to a tee—no matter who they hurt along the way—keeps them from being healed. As a matter of fact, the rigid Laws, and their insistence on keeping them is why they end up having Jesus Crucified!!!

For it is from the bondage of these Laws which do nothing but point out sin and death, that Jesus saves us!!! Otherwise, we'd all stay "bent over!" Paul writes in Galatians, *"It is for freedom that*

*Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourself be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” And in Colossians he writes, “Don’t let anyone judge you about eating or drinking or about a festival, a new moon observance, or Sabbaths...These religious practices are only a shadow of what was coming...They look wise with this self-made religion and their self-denial by the harsh treatment of the body, but they are no help...”*

It’s almost as if Paul is saying that these old rules and regulations are kind of akin to some of the laws that America still has on the books. For instance, according to the law, in Wheeler, Mississippi, young girls are never allowed to walk a tight rope unless it’s in a church. In Blackwater, Kentucky, tickling a woman under her chin with a feather duster while she is in a church service carries with it a penalty of \$10.00 and a day in jail. No one can eat unshelled, roasted peanuts while attending church in Idanha, Oregon. In Honey Creek, Iowa, no one is allowed to carry a slingshot to church except for a policeman. In Slaughter, Louisiana, turtle races are not allowed within 100 yards of a local church. And in Studley, Virginia, swinging a Yo-Yo in church or anywhere else in public for that matter on the Sabbath is prohibited.

And in Jesus’ day, it was not legal to heal a sick person on the Sabbath, but it was alright to *“untie your ox or donkey from its stall and lead it out to get a drink.”*

One warm spring evening in May of 1998, Christopher Sercy was playing basketball with his friends half a block from Ravenswood Hospital. Three gang members looking for a target approached and shot the young boy in the stomach.

His frantic friends carried him to within 30 feet of the hospital and ran inside for help. The emergency room personnel refused to go outside to save the young dying boy, citing a policy that only allows them to help those who are inside the hospital.

As is so often the case, when we legalistically insist on the letter of the Law, the needs of others are overlooked. By holding to standard operating procedures, the “royal law of love” gets pinned to the mat. In Matthew 9:13 Jesus said, *“go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’”*

As those who seek to follow in the path of Jesus, let’s be free from those things that bend us to the point of breaking. Let’s not judge or limit the power of God’s work. Let’s not do anything that keeps others in our faith community or in our larger world, bent over and broken.

Let us pray, O God, show us the way to help others find freedom from living bent over. Free us from the bent-over places in our own lives. We ask for the carrying and courage that only Jesus can give.

Amen.