

"The Spirituality of Power"

Luke 13:10-17

August 25, 2019

The Reverend Julia A. Carlson
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

When my oldest nephew was about three years old, he faithfully watched the ground when we took a walk. He constantly scanned the way ahead for 'interesting' things like branches and leaves, or dandelions and paper wrappers though occasionally there was something truly unique; I still have two beautiful blue puree marbles that he found sitting in the middle of a sidewalk in south Minneapolis. I thought he might become a collector of some kind but in fact, he is a tattoo artist. You never know.

The woman in today's scripture, like a three-year old, has a constant view of the ground. We do not know fully the condition of her spine, but her story has the unofficial title of The Bent Over Woman. As one with a curvature of the spine, this woman is important to me; I found a tile painted by a Navajo artist named R. C. Gorman that depicts a hunchbacked Native American woman using a blanket as a shawl and walking through the desert following a trail of broken pottery. Given the bend in her spine, it seems to be her life's work to pick up the pieces.

I imagine the woman from our Luke passage in that same humble posture; it is the posture of the downtrodden or burdened. In that position it would be a strain to look up and her view would always be at a certain slant. Indeed, it is possibly only the children who can look her in the eye. She is not blind but goes through life with a fairly narrow view and clearly she is not invisible but it may be that she does go unnoticed and in terms of eye contact, and from that perspective is almost completely unseen.

Until Jesus.

Out of the blue on a Sabbath morning/day, Jesus straightened and realigned her spine. What a wonder; what grace, what blessedness! But then what challenge and distress, not for the woman, but for the religious authorities. Spine straightening is work and there should be no work on the Sabbath. Religious law is religious law after all, what was Jesus thinking? The religious authority said that she has lived bent over for a long time bent over and with healing guaranteed the next day, surely she could have waited twenty-four hours. But then Jesus' actions say, as with racism, gay marriage and gay rights, passing the ERA, climate change (or climate change denial), separating families and detaining immigrants, one more day is one more day too long.

This isn't, strictly speaking, a healing story. Biblical healing stories have a certain rhythm: first, a description of the ailment, then, the worsening of the ailment (possibly even death), which is followed by the healing touch or words and the rising up or awakening of the sick, and finally, proof of wellness as the stricken person gets something to eat or gets up to engage in some work or activity. This story has a healing element but is more about power and who has power; it is about the struggle to follow God instead of our rules about God; to become like Jesus rather than learn more about him, and to follow the Spirit without fear of what is out ahead of us and unseen.

In every exchange Jesus had with a woman that I can think of, Jesus liberated her, he empowered women both through physical healing and through faith formation. In conversation with Jesus, the Samaritan woman, who went to the well in the heat of the day to avoid meeting other women and men from her village, became a prophet; after speaking with Jesus she went straight into town and spoke to all of them, "Come and meet a man who told me everything I've ever done."

And, while I'm sure Jesus appreciated Martha's cooking, he welcomed Mary to join in discipleship and said she chose the better path; very liberating indeed. It's possible we could say that the Syro-Phoenician woman liberated Jesus, but certainly Jesus liberated the woman with the flow of blood by inviting her back into the fullness of life. As Anne Lamott says, "I do not understand the mystery of grace – only that it meets us where we are but it does not leave us where it found us."

Equally remarkable, if not more so, was that Jesus consistently – and in even greater numbers – liberated the men. When the blind see, the deaf hear, and those with leprosy or epilepsy are cured, when men are offered equality in relationship and meaningful work they too are liberated into fullness of life – grace meets them where they are but does not leave them where they were. With Jesus, comes an equality among men not offered in a culture where race and religion determined one's place in life's hierarchy. Because Jesus was always focused on God, he did not endorse the human made barriers – the pecking orders or social strata. Sadly, it did not take long for all of that to apply to the church named for Jesus himself.

Philip Yancy once wrote, "C. S. Lewis observed that almost all crimes of Christian history have come about when religion is confused with politics. Politics ... allures us to trade away grace for power, a temptation the church has often failed to resist" (*What's So Amazing About Grace?*).

The intent is to allow Jesus to meet us where we are at and then to let him change us, to let him help us stand up straighter, to let our experience of need bring us to another way of thinking and being. The intent is to make us aware of what is crippling our ability to look into the eyes of the the immigrant, the Muslim neighbor, or the homeless man with the same compassion we have for ourselves and our family.

The invitation is to enter into the kingdom of God is bringing where the kind of equality that Jesus lived is the goal and norm. As individuals, we have enormous power; together, we multiply our power considerably. When we live in hierarchies, someone or some group reigns and others have to rein in, some are always powerless and treated as children – the endearing language of "child of God" is turned against humanity as the slave, immigrant, and indigenous are marginalized by the one who says, I know what is best for you. In this model, some have public or corporate power because of race, gender, physical size, economic status or a willingness to put down freedom by force and others spend their lives trying to climb that pyramid or scrabbling for power by association.

We may not immediately imagine the connection between the bent over woman and a school yard bully, but both are in a paralysis of isolation and pain.

Author Toni Morrison said, "I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else'."

So it is that Morrison hands us a key, Jesus never feared the outcome of using his power; when he healed someone or released them into their full potential, he did not worry they might go too far – even though some probably did; he didn't have to worry because there is forgiveness, there is grace. He did not worry they would be out of his control – these are our human problems; it is we who do not want someone moving the boundaries beyond our comfort zones, it is we who want to continue to define the game and its rules, because we know how to play.

Or do we? Forbes magazine recently published an article that stated, "Authoritarian leadership is out." Millennials want leaders, not bosses; they want transparency and believe everyone should have a voice. The article was written by (Ashura Prossack,) a Millennial and Gen Z Engagement Expert. My generation didn't have one of those – but then my generation wasn't on the cusp of sweeping cultural change. 10,000

Baby Boomers are retiring each day so, Forbes reports that Millennials the “largest employee demographic” in the US and “the largest and most influential generation of consumers ever.” (“How Millennials Are Changing the Way We View Leadership, published May 8, 2019, accessed on-line 8/9/2019.)

The students from Parkland High School are becoming a national voice for background checks and gun legislation; they are asking all of us to wrestle with the question of whether weapons of war belong on our streets. And beyond the cause, itself, they are saying, we don't believe we have to be in our fifties or forties or thirties to ask you to listen to us. They amaze me; they are standing straight and tall, with wisdom beyond counting the years they have been alive – perhaps because they've faced down death. We need not look down on them as children but are invited to look up to see the eyes of the future.

So, it appears, the work of the kingdom and the leadership of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the church. At Luther, we are fond of saying, “The church doesn't have a mission, God's mission has a church” (Dwight Zschele, lecture). Or, as C. S. Lewis was so fond of writing, “Aslan is on the move.” God is bringing it

Shall we step out into the unknown or stay bent over watching our familiar ground? In this time of such sweeping change, true spiritual discernment is needed as never before. The measure and direction of God's will in any circumstance is, according to Jesus' teachings and actions, abounding freedom, and wellness and wholeness of all people. We in the church have, in our time, an invitation to repent of our own hierarchies and clericalism and we may want to repent of trying to control or tame Jesus as the synagogue leader did.

Over and over again, we see Jesus' power is undeniable – so it's led us to a Catch-22: if we want to keep anyone bent over, limited, or controlled, if we want anyone of another race, creed, or color to believe we know best and they are lesser than – then we cannot let them meet the gospel! Since that is not our HOH history, nor our faith and practice, our only alternative is to bring it – to bring the gospel with all its risks and unknowns; with all its conflict provoking truth; to bring it everywhere we go and in all that we do. And to bring it in a way that brings love, real hope, and freedom. May it be so. Amen.