

Straightening the Bent, and Bending the Straight  
 Matthew 12:1-14 Luke 13:10-17  
 August 22, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

*Matthew 12:1-14*

*At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. <sup>2</sup> When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath." <sup>3</sup> He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? <sup>4</sup> He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. <sup>5</sup> Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? <sup>6</sup> I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. <sup>7</sup> But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. <sup>8</sup> For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath." <sup>9</sup> He left that place and entered their synagogue; <sup>10</sup> a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. <sup>11</sup> He said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? <sup>12</sup> How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath." <sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. <sup>14</sup> But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.*

*Luke 13:10-17*

*Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. <sup>12</sup> And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." <sup>13</sup> And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. <sup>14</sup> But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day." <sup>15</sup> Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger, and lead it away to water it? <sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?" <sup>17</sup> As he said this, all his adversaries were put to shame; and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.*

Many years ago I had the task of moving several hundred board feet of lumber which had been stored outdoors under a tarp. The covering had

protected the boards from the weather, but hadn't prevented some burrowing insect from carving numerous tunnels through the planks.

Some had been so thoroughly eaten, they broke in half when I re-stacked them in their new location. It was then that I discovered the culprit that had been (if you'll pardon the expression) *boarding* there. Tumbling out of the tunnels poured the twisted bodies of dozens of ants. It was winter, and the segmented bodies of the insects were stiff, distorted, twisted shapes and nearly unrecognizable as ants. Although the air was cold, the sunlight was strong, and slowly their black bodies absorbed the warmth. Ice crystals dissolved into water, corkscrewed legs began to straighten, antennae began to twitch, and their bodies pulled into shape. The dead were coming to life, and it was a stunning sight to see.

Perhaps the people standing around Jesus on that ancient Sabbath day witnessed a scene not unlike mine regarding the ants as the warmth of Jesus' healing straightened the woman's crooked body. If they had formerly noticed the woman at all, it was likely as an unwelcome curiosity. Or maybe they didn't really see her. We tend to ignore that which we don't know what to do with, so it is not unusual for people to become invisible, especially those who fall outside the norm, and especially those who may want to claim something from us.

I remember the street people I used to encounter when I worked in Chicago. They in their smudged and mussed clothing, they of the unbathed aroma, they with the dead look in their eyes – how practiced the rest of us became at pretending we didn't hear, "Got some spare change, mister?" and acting as though something in the shop window we were passing was so stunningly attractive that we failed to notice the need in that odd person passing by.

So here she comes, that bent woman frozen into a painful posture, tunneling through that crowd of straight, unbent people around her. After all, what can one do, folks say about the street people; they're just part of the city's landscape, just an element of that residual poverty that will always be with us, twisted and bent with joblessness, or mental illness, or addiction, or bad luck. In other words, they are symbols of everything the rigidly straight thank God they are not and would prefer not to have anything to do with.

On she comes, parting the crowd, her shoulders hunched and her face focused on the ground. It's what Luke doesn't say about her that I think is interesting. He doesn't say that she had come to see Jesus; he doesn't say that she asked to be healed. Quite the contrary. It's all Jesus' initiative. Luke says, "*When Jesus saw her, he called her....*", and he healed her.

Now, one of the dangers of a story like this is that some of us are so enamored of the miraculous we will stop reading too soon. It turns out the healing is but a small moment in a continuing narrative. The healing is over in a trice. "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity," is about as undramatic and almost dismissive an announcement of a healing as you will find in scripture. A verse and a half and the whole thing is over. There must be bigger issues at

stake than the straightening of a twisted woman's body. Straightening the painfully bent, it seems, is the quick and easy part. What's really tough and what may take a lifetime is bending the painfully straight.

Let's go back a few verses and collect some information. The scene is the synagogue. It is the Sabbath, the day which the Law reserves exclusively for the worship of God. No other activity was to be engaged in on the Sabbath. And so, as was required, all the good men of the town had gathered to study and worship. Jesus was an observant Jew, so it was his custom, as well, to be there. In fact, Luke tells us he was teaching at the synagogue, meaning that he was interpreting the scriptures and debating the finer points of Law and the preaching of the prophets. He was, in short, being a rabbi.

So, here's the cast of characters: Jesus, the bent woman, the congregation, and the synagogue's leaders. It seems to be a perfectly normal Sabbath day -- a day of joyful worship, of stimulating theological dialogue, of brothers in the faith enjoying their heritage -- until "woman, you are freed from your infirmity." That was when things turned sour. The synagogue leaders took high exception to the healing. It wasn't anything Jesus said but what he did: he broke the Sabbath by healing the woman.

Now, from our perspective we may think this is much ado about nothing in particular, but that would just be a case of us in a later time and out of a very different tradition not being willing to see things through other eyes. The rigid laws about the sabbath are no big deal for us. In the first place, we don't observe the Sabbath at all. Officially the Sabbath is from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Sunday, in Christian parlance, is the Lord's Day. Combined, these days constitute what we call a weekend, and weekends are for doing whatever in the world we want to do, and our weekends usually involve work of some kind and sometimes involves worship, but not necessarily. Most of us give virtually no attention whatsoever to the prescribed observance of the Sabbath that is so clearly spelled out in the Torah, the books of law in the Old Testament. But to the devout of Jesus' time, and to many devout Jews (and some Christians today), the Sabbath was something to be taken very seriously. After all, it is one of the Ten Commandments, which -- if we did indeed inscribe in marble in our court rooms or on our public lawns -- would grind our weekends which are frenzied with lawn mowing and football games to an absolute halt.

So, look what one of the leaders of the synagogue does when Jesus violates the sabbath by healing the woman. The official does not reprimand Jesus or scorn the woman. Rather, he hectors the congregation and says, in effect, "This is the sabbath! Come any *other* day to be healed, but don't come for *that* today!" But here is Jesus doing what he is doing, and here's the unbent woman jumping up and down for joy, and there is the congregation doubtless in an uproar over the marvelous thing that has happened, and as Luke tells it, the leader of the synagogue is in a snit trying to be heard, saying, "This is improper! This is improper!" It's like the visitor at a service in a Presbyterian church who became very excited during worship and would jump up and shout "hallelujah!"

every so often, and the minister asked him to please stop interrupting, and the man said, "But I've got religion!", but the minister replied, "But you didn't get it at a Presbyterian church."

Read what scripture says about the Sabbath. Exodus 31 spells it out: *Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death.* This was serious stuff, and the leader of the synagogue tried to get the congregation's collective head straight on the matter. The consequences could be dire! But Jesus would have none of it. He called them hypocrites and opened a line of argument that reminded them all of the allowance the Law gave for doing some necessary things on the Sabbath, such as caring for livestock. You couldn't hitch up your ox to a plow on the sabbath, but you could unhitch them from their overnight tether, lead them out of the house and water them.

And factor this in: infirmities of all kinds, including the bent spine of the woman, were understood as an affliction of an evil spirit. That's what Luke termed it, *a spirit of infirmity*. That doesn't simply mean that the woman had a bad attitude, but that she was possessed by a demon. So, what Jesus performed was an exorcism, and his argument was that just as the Law allows you to unhitch your ox from the post, so is it reasonable to cut the bonds of evil which had tethered this woman, and nothing could be more appropriate to the spirit of the sabbath than such liberation.

The question at the heart of the controversy, then, becomes the climax of Luke's story: what is the Sabbath for? Or, another way of putting it in more theological terms, what makes life holy? And the lesson seems clear from Jesus' example that what makes our lives holy are not legalisms and rigidities but whatever heals, refreshes, and lifts up, and perhaps we should add whoever sees an evil and acts to remove its influence. And further, the Law makes life holy when we compassionately employ it to celebrate God's freeing us from bondage, not when we employ it to keep them crippled, in pain, and excluded.

It all starts with seeing, with noticing that which has escaped notice and with paying attention to that which has been ignored. Especially it means noticing people. The focus of Jesus' ministry was always people, people, people. The faith founded in Jesus' name is not one of aloofness and introspection and individualistic salvation. It is by nature communal and assertively activist. It is at its core focused on liberating the captives. Especially in Luke's gospel is this strain of loosing the captives made clear. The first time we see Jesus in a synagogue, at the very beginning of his public ministry, Jesus reads from the prophet Isaiah these words: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."* (Luke 4:18-19)

And the challenge to each of us as followers of him whose ministry is liberation starts, as it did with the bent woman, in noticing who is around us – not just the persons we know best, nor the persons just like us, but the others whom

we would just as soon ignore or forget. What movement of compassion and faith will move our society to abandon its rigid rules about who is deserving and who is not? What will it take to bend society away from its harsh moralistic prejudices and curve the heart toward healing kindness and wholesome hope?

Scripture has a way of scrutinizing us, asking us questions, making us reconsider our world. The Bible makes the world of our concern bigger and our own little worlds smaller. It sharpens our sight and our hearing that we can see what needs straightening and hear the cries of bondage. The gospel carves an arc of grace toward one another. In the process we learn how to humbly bend our knees and lower our gazes and extend our hands. In the process we help free those in bondage to evil and are freed from our bondage to selfishness.