

The 12th Sunday after Pentecost (C)
Proper 16
August 22, 2010
Text: Luke 13:10-17

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This summer, when our family spent a week at Holden Village, Melinda and I enjoyed getting out to hike on some of the beautiful trails that lead up into the mountains all around. Our favorite is the trail that leads up to Holden Lake. There's one part of the trail that winds its way up the slope through a stand of fir trees. After coming up a long set of switchbacks out in the sun, it feels so cool and nice in the shade of the trees. It smells moist and refreshing. This year I noticed something interesting about those trees. Down near the trunk they all curve out toward the downhill slope before they straighten up to reach high overhead. I wondered what could have caused that, and I thought of how much snow falls each winter high up in the Cascades. I imagined that when those trees were seedlings, growing into saplings, every winter they'd be flattened down by the heavy snow. And as they grew, their growth would be shaped by the weight of all that snow—year after year and winter and winter, pushing them down. And now, as mature trees, they are bent in a way that suggests something of what they have endured.

I thought of those trees this week as I was reflecting on our gospel story, about the bent over woman, and about how her story might speak to us. Those trees were tall. They towered high overhead. But down near the trunk they were bent over. I wonder about the ways each of us might carry some mark that our life experience has left on us. I don't mean just the scars left over from some childhood accident, like what I have from a rather spectacular bike crash. I'm thinking especially of the invisible marks that can continue to exert power over us, that can make us feel bent over in some way, carrying some heavy weight, or unable to feel fully free and fully alive. Maybe we carry with us consequences of choices we've made, or maybe we've been deeply affected by the actions of others. Maybe we carry a load of fear and anxiety that makes it hard to ever let down our guard. Or maybe we've experienced some deep hurt or betrayal, and now find it hard to trust anyone. And God only knows how many other ways life can wound us or leave a mark on us.

Our gospel story for today invites us to meet Jesus as the One who can touch our lives with God's power for wholeness and healing, so that we can experience the fully and genuinely human life that we were created for—a life of loving God with our whole heart and loving our neighbor as ourselves. The story begins with the community gathered for worship, and Jesus was there teaching. There was a woman who had been crippled for 18 years—hunched and bent over, unable to stand up straight. Imagine what she had been enduring for 18 years—in addition to the physical pain, there was also the social isolation from never really being able to look someone in the eye, always

having her gaze focused down, to the dust, so that other people would look down on her—perhaps with pity, perhaps with a sense of superiority. The gospel writer says she had “a spirit that had crippled her,” or more literally, “a spirit of weakness.” It’s a way of saying that her affliction was not some punishment from God. And I can say the same thing about the burdens we carry. God’s work is not to punish, but to give life. God’s deep desire for every person, for everyone of us, is for us flourish, to be fully alive, to rejoice in God’s goodness and for our whole lives to be an expression of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Notice what happens as the story unfolds. The people of the village may have looked on the woman as an object of pity or scorn—or maybe they never even really saw her at all. But Jesus saw her as a daughter of Abraham, beloved by God. And with the power of his love, he speaks words that change her life: “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And when he laid his hands on her, she stood up straight and began praising God.

I wonder what words Jesus might speak to us to change our lives, to help us stand up straight and begin praising God. Maybe the words we need to hear are something like, “Child of God, all your sins are forgiven. In the cross, God has taken care of everything that might stand between us and our Creator. God does not judge or condemn you, but holds you in an eternal embrace of love.” Or maybe the words we need to hear are something like, “Child of God, do not be afraid, because your life has been caught up in God’s eternal embrace of love. There is nothing in life or death that is more powerful than God’s love, nothing that is able to separate you from the love of God in Christ.” Or maybe we need to hear something like, “Child of God, you have been forgiven so that you can experience the gift and freedom of forgiving others, of releasing them from your judgment and anger. God wants to open your heart, to set you free from the trap you’ve made for yourself, so that you can experience joy and peace.” Or this: “Child of God, this life is a temporary gift, but you belong to God in love forever, and God will be with you through any illness, any trouble, through all of this life and beyond.”

And here’s the amazing thing. Because God has raised Jesus from the dead, Jesus is able to continue his healing ministry, speaking these healing words, and more, today. As we receive the word of Christ in worship, his word addresses us: Child of God, be free from your burden. As we share the meal of bread and wine at Christ’s table of Holy Communion, we are addressed by Christ’s word: Child of God, receive the fullness of life that God created to know. As we pause during the rush of the week ahead to pray or read the Bible, Christ addresses us: Child of God, follow in my way and experience the abundant life I give. Perhaps we’ll experience Jesus’ life-giving word in some sudden, dramatic way, like the bent over woman. Or we might recognize Jesus’ power has been at work in us in a more gradual way, over the course of the years. Like the power of a river to wear down stone, the words of faith slowly

open our heart, bit by bit eroding built-up fear or bitterness, resentment or anger, washing away the residue of pain and hurt, so that our lives can flow freely and joyfully; so that, like the bent-over woman, we can stand up straight and give God praise.

Listen: the risen Christ speaks a word of healing for you this day. Listen as the risen Christ names you a beloved son or daughter, and calls you to be free from the burdens that weigh you down and leave you feeling bent. “Child of God, be free from your affliction.” God’s desire is for you to thrive and flourish, and to delight in this life with God. Thanks be to God! Amen