**10th March 2013**

**Luke 13.10-17**

**Bent and broken**

Before I became a minster I worked as a Social work Assistant for social services. I had a number of clients who I had to visit. One of whom was an elderly lady who was bent over in pain and who had a fierce temper and lashed out at all the home helps and nurses who attended to her. I was asked to go in and speak to her because all the other assistants had had enough of her harsh tongue. It was like walking into the lion’s den. I was met with a verbal volley of invective and insults. Cowering my head I stood my ground. When she had given all that she had I drew close to her. I reached for her hand and sat next to her and said Emily you seem to have a lot of anger. Where is it all coming from? She broke down in tears and voiced her fear over her declining health and also the absence of her daughter, who had become estranged from her after a row. As she unburdened all this I sense she had become a little less bent over and a little more upright. A little less bound by her anger. A little freer. Things started to change and the home helps sent word to me that Emily wasn’t quite the dragon she once was.

I think of Emily and many others who I have known to be bent over or bound by their inner demons as I read this text for today. I pray for protection for myself, thankful that I am not bent and broken like that. But in the moment that I say this prayer, I know that it betrays a lie. Closer to the truth is that I am thankful that my bent and broken nature is not visible to any but the most trained of eyes, perhaps visible only to the eyes of God.

I came across this language in, of all places, the science fiction writings of C. S. Lewis. The author of such diverse works as *Mere Christianity*, *The Screwtape Letters*, and *The Chronicles of Narnia* also wrote a trilogy of science fiction works, though little known. In them he tries to describe what Sin is, to beings who do not know. The word his hero finally settles on is "bent." By bent, I take Lewis to mean, misshapen, not the way we were made to be, and not fit for our intended purpose. We are all of us, bent: some, like the woman in our Gospel for today and Emily, literally bent over, the rest of us, simply out of shape, not as God intended.

**Bound and Set Free**

The difficulty with this is that in Luke's telling of this story the woman is not only "bent over" but also "bound." In fact the major language of Jesus' action for the woman is "untying." As I looked through the Greek text for this sermon, I was struck by the use of this very common word "to loose" or untie. Here it shows up several times: Jesus "sets the woman free" in verse 12, in verse 15 he reminds his critics that they also "untie" their cattle so they can drink on the Sabbath, in verse 16, Jesus reminds us that he has just "freed" (older versions say, "loosed") the woman from her bond and from her bondage to Satan. Satan in scripture is described as the accuser if believers, the deceiver, the destroyer of human lives and our relationships with God and ourselves. The one who ties us up so that we are unable to be who we are called to be – children of Abraham – children of the covenant, children of faith. Bound up we need someone to release us.

Of course, modern politically correct forces will talk about how words like "bondage" and "slavery" carry baggage that we don't want to address, but no one told Jesus or Luke to be politically correct.

*In today’s society mention bondage and younger people will think naughty thoughts. Some of you may already have so I might as well flag this up now. The bestselling fictional novels of last year, the fifty shades of grey series were all about a wealthy millionaire who likes bondage games where you tie your lover up and then you can do what you want with them. I haven’t read the books, honestly, but the books were read by millions. The story is how the love of a good woman frees him from his own inner bondage. Strange though what people read and what becomes popular and what it says about us as a society!*

The reality, *away from the fantasies*, is that we are all held to varying degrees in bondage to something, some habits, and some ways of behaviour that may not be good for us. Lent of course is a time for soul searching – to take a spring clean of our spiritual lives – to find resurrection, new life from deadly living.

Here in this passage in Luke’s gospel the problem, the root of the woman's bent shape, is described as bondage. But as the story continues, you find that the woman is not the only one impacted. The ruler of the Synagogue is also enslaved, and by the same force, though the symptoms might look different: one visibly bent the other with a spirit misshapen by a false sense of religious piety and obligation.

We notice that the woman was set free by Jesus, but what of the leader of the Synagogue? Was he also set free by Jesus' words? We can all see the weight of a spirit of illness that might weigh a woman down. We all recognize the demons of addiction that drown people in their own desperate search for relief from life's pains. We might understand the dark lords of depression that ensnare us in a quagmire of shame and self-loathing. But what can we do about the spirits of personal piety for religious justification? Do we know these demons enough to see the weight of their pride bending us out of shape, making of us creatures that seek to have God and God's laws serve us rather than the opposite? Are those of us weighed down and bent by the hidden demons of "right doctrine" or "clean living" also set free by Jesus?

The Rev. Bradley Schmeling is the pastor of St. John's Lutheran Church in Atlanta, GA tells how he was waiting his turn to see the emergency room doctor when a young mother came through the doors with her child, maybe three or four years old. The little girl was crying and the woman who, I took to be the child's mother, was holding a bloody handkerchief over the little girl's mouth. She looked around frantically for someone to help and rushed to the desk and said, *"My daughter's been hurt and I need to see..."* She was cut off in mid-sentence, *"You need to take a seat and wait for one of the clerks to sign you in."*

*"But my little girl was hit in the mouth by a..."* She was interrupted again. *"Please take a seat ma'am, someone will be with you shortly."*

Just then, the ER doctor walked in and said to the woman at the desk, *"Shame on you... this little girl needs help right now!"* He motioned to the woman and the little girl and led them to an examining room.

Briefly, (and guiltily) I wondered when my turn to see the doctor might come, but -- if I live to be a hundred years old, I wonder if I will ever see another time when a person's pain so clearly wins out over the system's protocol. *"Shame on you!"* I love it! The physician was looking at a child's pain. The clerk was looking at the hospital's procedure.

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Our scripture today is about a physician like that. Jesus is the "Great Physician" whose heart by nature goes out to the woman in need. Healing. Freedom. Good News. This was the stuff of the kingdom he came to proclaim. It had been set down from the time he announced why he came in the synagogue at Nazareth. People would come before procedures and relationship with God would come before regulations about God.

The story of the woman is a set up for conflict. It is becoming very clear as the gospel story moves ahead that the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim is on its way to a head on collision with the religious establishment.

The religious authorities who are gathered for worship are "locked in". Process. Procedure. Rituals. Requirements. The only thing lacking in Luke's story is a synagogue clerk who might ask the poor woman as she comes to Jesus for healing, *"Do you have insurance?"*

The answer is yes! She does have insurance. His name is Jesus!

The woman does not come to Jesus to seek healing? He seeks *her* out and calls her over. He sets her free because he *chooses* for her to be free. In Jesus, God is doing all of that for all of humanity. God does not wait for us to come to some understanding of our bent shapes. God joins us in the very depths of our possession. God, in Christ Jesus, takes on the full weight of our Sin and experiences our "bent-ness" on the cross. And God renders its power meaningless over us, even when we still seem more intent on holding on to it. Even though the ruler of this Synagogue is shamed by Jesus for the moment, will he recognize in due time that the woman's liberation on the Sabbath is his liberation as well? Luke does not tell us, we are left to ponder.

The tragedy of life is that many remain in bondage, bent over and not freed.

When I was training for ministry I did a year’s placement with Alcoholics Anonymous. It was an eye-opener. Not least because I attended the AA meeting in the middle of Manchester and often there would be a number of TV celebrities there. I avoided the temptation to get their autographs. But what I found is that there were a number of common factors in those who broke free. One was that they came to realise they were in bondage, they were bound and that they needed help. Unless you can realise you need help you aren’t going to change. Maybe you need to be challenged – maybe you need the voice of compassion and command like Jesus – ‘be set free’ in order to shake your life out of its prison. For a lot of the AA members it was when they bottomed out – reached rock bottom, nearly killed themselves with drink that they started to change. Sadly I heard many stories of those who went too far and did kill themselves.

Those who needed help flung themselves on the higher power – God, however they understood Him. There was deep spirituality in those AA meetings. Confession was important – each meeting would start with a confession ‘I’m an alcoholic… I know my weakness, lead me not into temptation – I’m self-aware now. The meetings were about accountability and encouragement. The fellowship of fellow pilgrims. So much is what we do as a church confessing to each other, sharing together, relying on each other and on God. Through all that Jesus can free us.

At the Old Spot on Thursday night I was talking about the gospel – what is it? Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God is heard. The kingdom of god is in conflict with kingdom of evil. God’s new benevolent society is already among us at work bringing transformation. Freed from oppression being led to a better day – a Sabbath – a holy rest of peace. I suggested that the purpose of the church is to form Christ like people who would embody and communicate the kingdom of God. The gospel saves us from the hell of becoming and staying the worst that we can be. In the words of St Ignatius from the second century, the gospel saves us for the glory of God – to be humanity fully alive. The church is the space where the Spirit works to form Christ like people and the space where human beings are formed in Christ in love, co-operating with the Spirit and one another to express love in word and deed, art and action.

What joy is found in this experience? We can be honest about how we are bent and broken. We can be honest about the bondage that enslaves us. We no longer have to hide. We are free to welcome the Christ who comes, sees us, like the woman, weighed down, and bids us come and be made whole.

In our gospel story, the opponents of Jesus are put to shame and the common people break into songs of gladness and joy. Jesus Christ defeats the forces of darkness and puts to shame everything that would keep God's children from experiencing the life God wants for them!

There is something marvellous about this whole story from the compassionate physician Luke. It puts the lie to all teaching and all myths that suggest God wants anything but joy for our lives! The church is designed to be the family of faith, the community of Jesus Christ. That means we are created to bring life, liberty, joy and the nearness of God to all who are hurting.

For the bent over woman, for the ruler of the synagogue, for Emily, for me, even so, Lord Jesus, quickly come – set us free.

 **with material from Rev. Dr. Director of Church Relations Luke Bouman
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