

August 21, 2016
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
Luke 13:10-17

Stand Up

I'm not a particularly tall woman, but sometimes I slouch. Some women friends of mine who are tall say they are conscious of slouching, but even though I'm not particularly tall, sometimes I slouch. I see it in other women, too, sometimes in young women, teen aged girls. Sometimes I see them stand with a hesitant hunch to their shoulders, necks bent, eyes cast down. Or sometimes you see older women who stand with a slouch, a hunch, their whole back bent, spine curved over itself, neck at an angle, hard to see much more than sideways.

There's a woman in today's gospel who is hunched over. We don't know if she is tall, or short, and we don't know how old she is either. I think it's often assumed that she's an older woman, because the narrator of the story says that she's been like this for eighteen years, or as Jesus himself says, adding a poignant word of recognition and compassion, "eighteen long years." This bent over woman may have been an older woman, but it's possible that she's not. It's possible that she just entered adulthood, that she was eighteen exactly, those eighteen years were her whole life long.

Maybe this woman had a medical condition such as osteoporosis, or early onset scoliosis, or maybe, simply, devastatingly, chronic back pain. Anyone who has had back issues, woman or man, can sympathize with what she must have experienced, for such a long time, living hunched over, perspective and ability to interact all circumscribed.

That's a painful, difficult bodily state—but I am intrigued that the gospel describes what she had not in biological terms, but in spiritual ones. It says that the woman had "a spirit that crippled her." Now we could read such language as indicative of the time period in which the gospel was written; we could dismiss this phrase as pre-Enlightenment thinking; we could call it an ancient and now scientifically corrected worldview. We could do that, except that I still see people hunched over. I still see people slouching, and I still slouch myself. I am speaking now not of a medical condition, but a theological one, of another way that we find ourselves in need of healing—in need of healing from the sickness that is sin.

Don't misunderstand me: I am NOT saying that this woman in the gospel had back pain because she did something bad. That is an ancient worldview that we do well to leave behind: Illness, disability, the debilitating suffering of chronic pain is NOT the punishment of God for something we've done wrong. That is no way to think of sin.

Sin is also more than a particular poor decision, a specific mistake or wrongdoing. Sin is part of the human condition. Why this woman makes me think of this, how sin affects us, what sin does to us, is that sin may look and feel like a physical pose: a person hunched over, head and eyes down.

I think this pose can help us think about sin in two ways. First of all, think of what that posture can convey, those slouching shoulders and downcast eyes: uncertainty about oneself, discomfort in one's being, personal dis-ease. I once had a conversation with a mother whose child is now a grown-up woman, a woman who has struggled for years—at least eighteen years—with self-confidence, self-esteem, self-image. Her mother said to me, "Even as a little girl, she would walk with her head bowed and her shoulders scrunched. I would see that and it would break my heart." Seeing that breaks God's, heart, too. It breaks God's heart to see us like

that. That self-abnegating pose is not what, not how God made us to be. In the act of creation God calls us good, as the very first chapter of the Bible repeats so emphatically, and then goes even beyond that, announcing the likeness in which we are created: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.” How is it that we can have a negative self-image, when we have been created in God’s image? God created us good, and then God breathed into us the Spirit, not a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love, as it says later in the Bible. Still, I slouch, and I am not alone, and it happens to women and to men. Self-doubt makes us hunch over, our heads down. Low self-worth can be crippling—and is completely odds with how God sees us: as the very masterpiece of creation. To think of ourselves as anything less than that is a kind of sin, a condition that we all experience.

But this is not the only way that sin brings us down. We can think too little of ourselves, and at the same time, paradoxically, we think too much of ourselves—or, perhaps, we think only of ourselves. So it is also that that physical pose, a hunched, curved back, may remind us of another description of sin, a phrase often used by Martin Luther, a phrase Luther got from St. Augustine. In Latin the phrase is “incurvatus in se” that is, the heart curved inward: sin as self-absorption. That too, is a condition we all experience. Our spines curve inward as we refuse to view situations from any vantage point but our own, as we assert that our wants and needs supersede everyone else’s, as we hoard the blessings that God intends for all to share.

Hunched over in self-doubt, hunched over in selfish pride: this is not the posture God wants us to have, this is not the stance God wants us to take. And so in Jesus, God does the work of healing, in the Spirit God does the work of realignment. That’s what the Bible tells us, that’s what the Bible is all about, that’s what church is all about. It’s no accident that this healing story is connected with a question about the Sabbath. What is Sabbath about? What is worship, the participation in a community of faith for? It’s about becoming aligned with God’s good and loving desires for us and for the world. The Sabbath, the practice of praise, this community of people, this coming together in worship and prayer and offering and service is a chiropractic exercise, a way of becoming better aligned with God. Being part of this can help us become better aligned with God in the way we use our time, and what we do with our money, and how we treat creation, and how we see one another. How much we need God’s help and healing in how we see one another, especially in how we see those who are bent over, whose spirits are crippled—which includes every one of us.

God sees that—God sees us. In the gospel Jesus God sees this woman, and says to her and to us: be free from your ailment. You know what was the first thing that bent over woman saw when she was able to stand up straight, when her eyes were no longer cast down? Who was it? Jesus.

Stand up, and see God, see the world, see yourself anew, see what God has created you to be and do. Stand up straight, like the women on the U.S. women’s Olympic basketball team, which has five team members over 6.4, who just won their 6th Olympic gold medal in a row. Stand up like the gymnast Simone Biles, who strikes such powerful poses at four feet eight. Stand up like the coach of a South African man who ran the 400 meter race, who won it from the outside lane, smashed the longstanding world record to boot. His coach was standing by as he did it, his coach, who is a white-haired great grandmother.

Stand up, whether we are short or tall, women or man, young and old, stand up because God has created us, and redeemed us, and still sustains us, to stand up.