

Title: Bent People
Preaching: Randy Spleth, Senior Minister
Scripture: [Psalm 103:1-5](#)
Text: [Luke 13:10-17](#)
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I remember the first time it happened. I'll admit that up until that very occasion, I was skeptical about most dorsalgia. I was too young; I hadn't experienced enough gravity. It happened here, in our first sanctuary, what we now call the Great Hall. David Duncan, then our director of music and I were resetting the sanctuary after the special Christmas music service. Together, we bent over to remove the pedals from the organ and suddenly, what I thought for many was more imagined than real, happened to me. My back grabbed and I was "bent over and quite unable to stand up straight." It was unexpected and agonizing.

Likely, you know the feeling. Eighty percent of Americans will experience back problems at some point in their lives.¹ Almost all of us have had that experience of reaching down to scoop up a child or bending over to pick up a box. Suddenly, something goes terribly wrong. A back muscle or a disk or a nerve has gone off-line and you find yourself bent over. In the twitch of a muscle, moving becomes miserable. When there is a wreck somewhere along the superhighway we call the spine, for at least a moment, you are bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.²

Some of you experience this periodically, as have I since the first episode almost thirty years ago. Some of you suffer chronically, experiencing pain which significantly impacts your life. Each week, there are at least half a dozen prayer petitions for pain management or procedures. We have a lot of bad backs around here but none so bad as to be bent in half for eighteen years. That's at the heart of this week's lesson, another story about Jesus healing in a synagogue.

If it sounds like a familiar story, it is. Jesus spends considerable time barnstorming the synagogues of Galilee. They were as much town hall gathering places for civic and political discussion as religious centers. More often than not, there is an encounter with someone who is ill, someone in need, or someone who was afflicted by a disease. With compassion, Jesus always responds. This amazes people, credentialing Jesus as a teacher with power and authority. It was an effective way to build his kingdom campaign.

But sometimes, it creates controversy because the healing takes place on the Sabbath. Barely into his ministry in the Gospel of Mark a man with a withered hand approaches Jesus. Jesus sees the need, feels the pain, and heals him. It upset the religious authorities because it was the Sabbath. Mark says they began to conspire against Jesus.

In the gospel of John, Jesus encounters a man who had been an invalid for 38 years. Jesus asks the man if he wants to be made well. He says "Yes" so Jesus says, "Take up your bed and walk." But it was the Sabbath and it upset the religious authorities. A few chapters later, the same thing happens when Jesus heals a man born blind. The authorities say, "This man couldn't be from God!" Why? He healed on the Sabbath, the Jewish holy day, a day in which their law said no work was to be done.

At first blush, this story feels like it is the same. But there is a clue that it might not be. It's a little thing but sometimes in the Bible, a little thing can point to a big thing. The little thing is this. Luke says there was a woman "with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years." The old KJV says she had a "spirit of infirmity." It is as if Luke, who Paul calls the beloved physician, is trying to tell us that it was not so much physical as it was spiritual, or psychological. Can a burdened mind, a troubled spirit result in a bent-over back?

You likely know the answer before I tell you because fully one-third of you believe that stress is the cause of your back problems.⁴ Perhaps. But what Luke is suggesting about this woman is, I believe, more than carrying stress in her back. He might not have known the medical description used today when he wrote "the spirit of infirmity" but it has a name—conversion disorder. That's the short name. The long name is "functional neurological symptom disorder." People with a conversion disorder don't have a real physical problem. But they have very real symptoms which can limit their ability to walk or swallow, see or hear. It can be quite persistent and severe and it is typically triggered by an extreme mental or spiritual stress, a psychological or physical trauma.⁵

This is a real condition and even if we haven't encountered it, we hear it in our language. He was paralyzed by fear. She died of a broken heart. He worried himself sick. We know that our mind and body are bound together. She had a "spirit that crippled her." Elsewhere in Luke, he says someone had leprosy, or dropsy, or was blind. Here, Luke says she had a "spirit of infirmity," a "spirit that crippled her." She had a spiritual problem that made her sick.

I have a colleague who tells a true story about a man whose right arm was drawn up in such a way as to become almost useless. He finally confessed to my colleague that years earlier he had struck his daughter in anger and injured her to point of hospitalization. "It was during that time," the man said, "that my arm began to draw up. I've hardly been able to use it since." The daughter had forgiven him, but as the pastor listened, he realized that what the man needed more than anything else was the assurance of God's forgiveness. So he took hold of this man's right arm, drawn up against his chest as it was, and prayed with the man that he might be able to accept that God could forgive him of all things, even of that. While he was praying the pastor began to feel that arm relax, and within a few days this man had recovered full mobility in that crippled limb. That is a clear example of a conversion disorder. Once the man was relieved of his guilt he was also relieved of his physical problem.⁶

I think Luke is suggesting something of the same about this woman, who had endured "a spirit" that had crippled her, bent her in half, for the past eighteen years. There is no way to know; only the hint of a little thing that is really a big thing. But just suppose that eighteen years ago, something happened. She did something so terrible, so shameful, so spirit shattering that she was overcome with guilt and could not look anyone in the eye. That's not so hard to imagine, is it? First, she just avoids eye contact, feeling embarrassed. Then, as her shame grows, she begins to lower her shoulders, guilt weighing her down. Year after year she wears the trauma until she walks at half-staff, quite unable to stand up straight. Somehow, she shuffles along and makes her way into the synagogue on the Sabbath.

We don't know if it was her practice to worship or if she wanted to hear Jesus. We know she couldn't see him. Her view is limited to the top of her own feet and the floor right in front of her. But Jesus sees her and an amazing thing happens. There in the rectangle with men sitting on all four sides, Jesus stands in the middle along with the scribe, a lively conversation going on about the Law, Jesus spots her and calls her forward. For Jesus to single out and call a woman to the center of the synagogue during the Sabbath, was highly unusual. But to call this diseased woman into his presence was even more startling. Even if those gathered didn't know what happened 18 years earlier, her disease was still viewed as a sign of divine displeasure. Bent-over, they believed, she was a clear indication of sin.

Slowly, she shuffled forward. How long did it take? Did she color, feeling once again the heat of embarrassment as eyes fell on her? She made her way to the voice which was calling her "Woman, you are set free..." (Luke 13:12) She finds herself looking at the feet of the voice that said these words. And then, Jesus goes to work. He takes her by her shoulders and

begins to pull her up. Now she sees his knees, his waist, chest and then, finally, she looks up, into Jesus' face. Can you imagine it? His is the first face she has seen upright in 18 years. What a face to see. "She stood up straight and began praising God." (Luke 13:13) I imagine her hands and arms up thrown over her head, tilting her head back as her spine fully unfurled. Alleluia! Praise God!" she cried, tears beginning to course down her cheeks. She *had* been set free, indeed.⁷

It must have been an incredibly joyful moment to see this woman who was straight for the first time in 18 years. But not everyone was happy with what had happened. Jesus was a "guest speaker" at this synagogue and he had offended the host, the "leader of the synagogue," the scribe who asked Jesus to share the floor. Outraged, he speaks over the woman praising God to the crowd, who had just witnessed a miracle. "There are six days on which work ought to be done," the leader said; "come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." (Luke 13:14)

Did you notice he says nothing to Jesus? Did you notice that he didn't express surprise that she had been healed? Did you notice that he doesn't question Jesus ability to create a miracle? This leader was not uncomfortable because Jesus healed someone. He was unhappy because this healing occurred on the Sabbath. The timing was his issue as if there were ever a bad time to be free from the burden of sin. But Jesus says to the leader of the synagogue and all those who are nodding in agreement, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath day untie his ox or his donkey and lead it to water?" (Luke 13:15) And shouldn't this woman, this daughter of Abraham, who has been tied up by this infirmity for eighteen years be untied on this day of all days? Shouldn't she be treated as well as an animal? Wouldn't it be the godly thing not to let her suffer not a second longer, but to release her from this spiritual burden?"

Jesus understands that setting people free is the work of God and that there is no day more appropriate for that than the Lord's day. Do you remember when he began this his barnstorming tour of synagogues? He goes to his hometown in Nazareth and says "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor... sent me to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free..." (Luke 4:18-19)

But of course, that may be the very thing that got the leader of the synagogue all riled up because he knows the kind of folk that shows up on the Lord's Day. He knows the place is filled with a bunch of bent people. The whole lot of them are bound by a spirit of infirmity, with a spirit that had crippled them for years. They may not show it but all of them, not just 80%,

have bad backs. The entire lot are burdened. I think that's what really bothered him because Jesus was acting like he came to straighten bent people up.

Which is of course exactly what he came for. You know that because you have been bound by a spirit of infirmity or two. It is another inevitable part of the human condition that bends us down. The weight of sin and failure. The weight of "what if" or "why did I?" We have all done things we should not have done, said things for which we experience guilt. There is a weight when we mess up. It is a weight that brings us down and brings us low and when we start to feel the weight of that sin on our shoulders, our back bends down and our spirits lock up, little by little and sometimes a little thing becomes a big thing.

Let me say it to you on this Lord's day: if you have been bound by a spirit of infirmity—by guilt, by shame, by fear, by despair, by self-loathing, by pride, by greed, by arrogance—whatever it is that bends down your mind, your heart, your spirit, hear this word: on this day, in this place, Jesus wants to take you by the shoulders and straighten you up. It is his nature, it is his pleasure, it is the work to which he was called and the purpose for which he came—to set bent people free.

¹ <https://www.thegoodbody.com/back-pain-statistics/>

² Sweet, Leonard, Love to Life. Retrieved by subscription @ <https://sermons.com/sermon/love-to-life/1468003>

³ RYAN, J. J. Jesus and Synagogue Disputes: Recovering the Institutional Context of Luke 13:10-17. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, [s. l.], v. 79, n. 1, p. 41–59, 2017.

⁴ <https://www.thegoodbody.com/back-pain-statistics/>

⁵ <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/conversion-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355197>

⁶ Summerville, Jim. *Stooped Over, Straightened Up* A Sermon for Every Sunday, Pentecost 14C (2016)

⁷ Whiteside, Kristen. *Set Free*. http://day1.org/8415-the_rev_dr_kristin_adkins_whitesides