

The Rev. Katherine Rollo – Luke 13:10-14 – Church of the Messiah, Aug. 21, 2022

The Woman Bent Over

If you were to measure my height today in stocking feet, I would come in at 5'4" tall. There was a time when I stood a statuesque 5' 7". Growing up, my mother used to say to me OFTEN "Katherine, stand up straight, "there is nothing more unattractive than a tall girl who slouches."

Now I didn't lose three inches of height from slouching because I didn't pay attention to my mother. As some of you will find out, age has a way of altering many of our physical characteristics, height being one of them. By telling you this I don't mean to suggest that this woman in the gospel reading was suffering from age related spinal compression. She was not just slouching.

Luke tells us that for 18 years she lived her life bent over. Her view of the world consisted of looking at the ground. It must have been a narrow, depressing existence.

Given my self-consciousness about standing up straight I was drawn to this story. It stood out to me for several reasons. Unlike others that Jesus healed, this unnamed woman was not born with this deformity, Luke was specific about the length of time she was in this condition, 18 years. I wondered if perhaps there was some event that occurred eighteen years ago that caused it. Perhaps something that Jesus and the people who were there knew about. So, I decided to do some exegetical digging, to find out what might have happened 18 years ago that bent her so badly.

Earlier in this chapter Jesus talked about a tragedy that occurred in Siloam, a neighborhood just south of Jerusalem. It was an incident obviously known to the people of the time. A tower collapsed, and people were killed, 18 to be exact. I could not get the coincidence of her suffering for 18 years and the ironic mention of 18 people killed earlier in the chapter out of my head. Was there a connection? Perhaps the unnamed woman in the gospel saw the tower collapse in Siloam that killed 18 people and it was more than she could bear; the trauma to her spirit affected her body in such a way that she could no longer stand up straight. Her way of coping with her pain was to keep her head down, focused on the ground.

Given the events of these past few years, I think her reaction to tragedy is something we can all understand. I find the state of my spirit at times is very well reflected in the way I carry myself these days. If my mother were alive, I am sure she would grow weary of telling me to 'stand up straight.' It is hard to stand up straight when pain and suffering are everywhere, we look. Like the woman in the gospel story, looking down, narrowing my view of the world, offers me a place to hide.

What also struck me in this story was that other times when Jesus healed, it was because the person asked to be relieved from their infirmity. This woman didn't ask to be healed. I

wondered why. Jesus was in the house! Why didn't she ask herself? I found the answer to that question when I remembered the title of a book, I read in the 1960s by Richard Farina, "Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me".

Perhaps this unnamed woman didn't ask to be healed because she didn't realize she needed healing. Her bent-over-ness was the way in which she had come to navigate the world. It became part of who she was – it was normal to live life focused on the ground. After 18 years she didn't know her spirit was broken. No longer realizing the state of her own body, soul, and spirit she never thought to ask Jesus for healing.

To Luke she was just an unnamed woman in a miracle story. But Jesus knew her whole story; he knew her name and that she needed more than just her body to be healed. He **saw** her and made the connection between her bent over body and the condition of her spirit.

Down so long, her brokenness was who she had become. But Jesus **saw** her and as Luke records, "Laid his hands on her." He touched that place within her that demanded her to walk upright. He broke her isolation and drew her back into the world as it is. Those 18 people were still dead but healed and standing straight, she could view her life and that tragedy from a different vantage point. At least upright she could see that she was not alone.

I'm certain there are times for all of us when what we see in the world breaks our spirit. And like the unnamed woman in this story our shoulders slump and our heads are bowed. It becomes too painful to look up and look out – so we look down. In that isolation, like the woman in the gospel we may not realize our own bent-over-ness and a need to be healed. Hopefully, at those times there will be those around us who like my mother, like Jesus in the gospel will become the hand of Christ, call us by name and through a gaze of love recognize our need to be healed and touch that place in our hearts so that we can walk upright. Jesus gifted that woman with the ability to stand up straight. I believe that we can be that healing gift to each other to stand straight, heads up and shoulders back. May it be so!