

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, August 21, 2016)

Text:

**Luke 13:10-17 (NRSV)**

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: "Bending Up"**

What do we do when the possibility of LIFE is held out to us? Do we cringe in fear or do we leap ahead? Do we create stumbling blocks out of the rules and ancient precepts that have bound us, or do we follow in the way of the Christ - breaking boundaries and stepping out with new ways of seeing and new ways of being so that we may quite literally change the world as we change ourselves? Do we bend down, concentrating on all that isn't working and the small, dark shadows we see bending beneath us, or do we bend UP and take in the big picture, seeing as God sees and lift our sights higher and higher so that we can peer beyond the down low of this world and take in the up high of what God has in store for us?

In looking at this miraculous story before us today, I was struck by the image of the woman coming before Jesus, who, as The Message interprets it was so, "twisted and bent over...that she couldn't even look up." Or, as our New Revised Standard Version says as Lester read it, "appeared with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years."

How our hearts are filled with compassion to think of what it must be like to be physically bent over, so crippled by arthritis or scoliosis or the effects of osteoporosis that the pain is constant and to stand up physically straight is literally impossible.

I have to think of my dear Grandma Brackbill, my mother's mother, who endured the effects of what was most likely Kyphosis, a pathological curving of the spine, which resulted in her hunching over more and more as the years progressed and looked to be quite painful and debilitating. How she would have loved for Jesus to come along and help her to stand up straight and see the world from His vantage point, freed from pain and limitation, able to go about her work again in a new way and with a new vision.

As Rev. Karoline Lewis comments in her essay, "Daughters of Abraham," once healed, the woman in our story today, "is [now] able to see with a whole new set of lenses. Once only able to stare at the ground, only able to get an alternate view by straining her neck for some sideline sight, only able to look at her own feet or those of another and never into their eyes, now she can see

faces. Now she can see where she is going. Now she can see that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Not that she didn't see that before, but it's different when the love of God becomes incarnated in your very self. She is now able to see what and who Jesus sees -- who needs to be cured. Who is in bondage. Those who are bent over with the weight of a world that continues not to care...[for] when you are able to see how Jesus sees, it is not just another perspective but an alternative way of living and leadership...[where] God does what the nature of God is -- mercy, grace, and love -- then mercy, grace, and love are how we are to be toward others."

What a fantastic message that is for us today, living in these times when too many of us are staring at the ground, reveling in the dirt and the minutia of what's wrong with this world and missing the great big God picture if we would only stand up to see it. The picture of God's peaceable kin-dom where the light shines brightly and every tree, cloud, bird and angel sing, encouraging us to look up, rise up, bless our Maker and this magnificent creation rather than curse the darkness as we bend lower and lower towards that which is OF this world instead of being the light WITHIN it.

For, make no mistake, this world can and oftentimes will bend you over with its cares and woes. Those who celebrate what's wrong instead of what's right will push you down with their dire predictions and doomsday scenarios. As we look down and away from God, it's easy to be convinced that darkness and degradation win. But those who live in the light, who carry the Christ in their hearts are looking at life with different eyes, and it is this seeing that will lift all of us up.

For you see, those who lift the light for themselves will also lift the light for you to see it and before you know it we're all walking with heads raised high and hearts ready to embrace the truth that, as Father Richard Rohr states it, "wherever there is love, that's where God is." And let me tell you, God is everywhere.

It's sad to me that so many religious leaders and scholars throughout history and even today forget that primary truth. Focusing on the rules and rituals of religion and pious practice, they forget what Jesus was truly talking about and the love that was always primary in every encounter and in every lesson he offered.

Rather than rejoice at the healing of this woman beset by pain and a downward perspective, the leader of the synagogue in our story today berates Jesus for healing on the Sabbath and breaking a rule as he interpreted it. But Jesus will have none of it, pointing out that even as an animal is untied and given water on the Sabbath, so should we show love and compassion for a human being in need of the life giving water that comes from God -- and what better time to do it than on the day set aside for complete devotion to God.

"Jesus' healing acts invite us to see every place as a healing place and every moment as the right moment for creative transformation," Dr. Bruce Epperly states in his commentary on today's text. "Providence is broadcast everywhere without limits or exclusion. This is the day that God has made; this is the day of healing and transformation; and this day is every day."

I wonder how often we allow the rules and regulations we were raised with or the interpretation of God's law as others and even we ourselves have parsed it keep us bent low and away from the truth of what God wants to create in our lives and in the fulfillment of the kin-dom being created here on earth as it is in heaven.

When have we been so bent on observing the letter of the law that we miss the opportunity to observe the law of love, that, yes, I'm going to say it, trumps every other law there is.

"Teacher, of all the laws, which commandment is the greatest?"

"Love the Eternal One your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is nearly as important, "Love your neighbor as

yourself.” The rest of the law, and all the teachings of the prophets, are but variations on these themes. (The Voice, Matthew 22:36-40)

Rules are important, laws help us live in both the worldly realm and God’s realm, but in knowing and obeying the law, sometimes we overlook the greatest law there is: to love – both God and our neighbor.

“...as important as law is -- and notice that Jesus doesn’t set aside the law but rather offers a different interpretation of it -- it must always bow to mercy, to life, to freedom,” Dr. David Lose writes in his essay, “The Law of Love.” “ Law helps us live our lives better, but grace creates life itself. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. Law pushes us to care for each other, but grace restores us to each other when we’ve failed in the law... For above and beyond all the laws ever received or conceived, the absolute law is love: love God and love your neighbor. Or, perhaps, love God by loving your neighbor.”

We may be thirsty and parched,  
like an unwatered garden,  
so we come into God’s presence:  
knowing that the Divine One is a spring of water!

We may be weary from worry and work  
so we come into God’s presence:  
knowing the Holy One offers us Sabbath rest!

We may be lost or confused  
so we come into God’s presence:  
knowing the Wise One offers us welcome and guidance!

We may be bent over with struggle or pain  
So we come into God’s presence:  
knowing the Healing One empowers us to stand strong!

Bend up, bend up, o my Soul, Bend up and see the glory of God rising before you!  
Amen.