

The God Who Can Straighten Out Your Life

What's it like to live without hope? What's it like to decide that your dreams are beyond your abilities and to resign yourself to living without any prospect of things ever getting better?

It's an awful feeling, this hopelessness, this sense that tomorrow will be no better than today, that there is no use dreaming because your dreams will never be realized, and that all you can do is slog along and survive as best you can without any prospect that things will change.

If you are feeling hopeless or you know someone who is, then this sermon is for you.

In our gospel today, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue one Sabbath day and a woman was there who had been crippled for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up. The Bible says that she had "a spirit that had crippled her..."

That's an interesting phrase. I've known lots of people who have been crippled by a spirit. Some of these people are bent over and cannot straighten up.

I've seen drug addicts and alcoholics on the streets of Victoria and London bent over by a spirit of dependency. I've seen people laid off from their jobs and now unable to find work bent over by a spirit of resignation – a sense that life is passing them by and things will never be better than they once were. I've seen young adults graduate from college bent over with no sense of purpose of where they are going and what they can become.

I've seen people bent over with a sense of inadequacy to face the challenges that confront them. The sad thing is that they are not inadequate. But somehow along the way they have been made to feel that way, and they go around with the weight of the world on their shoulders. And you can see it in the way they walk – and the way they talk. "How are you doing?" "Oh, I'm getting by."

There are many healthy, intelligent, well-educated people who go through life feeling like losers. They've been blessed with so many talents, but sabotage themselves time and time again because their attitude is so bad. When you feel down on yourself, when you feel that there is no hope left, it causes you to act in irrational ways.

Have you ever wondered why terrorists blow up themselves and other people? It makes no sense, except for the fact that hopeless people do desperate things. After all, when you have nothing else to lose, what's the point of living?

And it's not just terrorists. We sabotage ourselves at work, we sabotage ourselves in our relations with other people, and we even sabotage our own happiness.

Emotionally and spiritually, this is what it means to be bent over in life – bent over with a spirit of inadequacy and defeat – bent over with guilt and shame. Bent over with all kinds of burdens we just can't handle by ourselves.

The woman in our gospel story had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. Then Jesus saw her. And what he saw was not a bent over woman, but a beautiful woman just waiting to be liberated by God's love. The woman saw herself as bent over and broken, but Jesus saw her as a person of true worth.

At one of the parishes where I served as rector, we had a school for special needs children – children who were mentally and/or physically disabled. Many of them could not speak very well, if at all. But a few were quite articulate. One day one of the teachers came to school with a serious bruise that covered half her face, the result of her car swerving on ice and hitting a telephone pole. At first the teacher worried that her appearance might upset the children. The first child at the center who saw her was a bubbly and talkative little girl. When she saw the teacher's face, she said, "You have a rainbow on your face." Where the teacher had seen the ugliness of bruises, the little girl had seen the beauty of a rainbow.

Some of us have a rainbow of hurts in our hearts. We live in fear of the future. Our health is uncertain. Our jobs are endangered. We are coping with family matters that are weighing us down more than we can handle. But here's the good news: Jesus knows! We have a friend who cares about our situation.

Even more important, Jesus has the power to lift the burdens from our back. Jesus can set us free. Our gospel tells us that when Jesus saw this bent over woman, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Do you remember John Bunyan's great work *Pilgrim's Progress*? In one scene, pilgrim is carrying a heavy load up a hill. It is the burden of his guilt, but it could just as easily be some other burden that you are now experiencing. The load is so heavy that he is sure, at times, he will fall under its weight. At one point on the hill, pilgrim passes an open tomb. Then up again, upon a little knoll, he finds himself beneath a wayside cross. And as its shadow falls upon him, his burden begins to slip from his back. It tumbles down the hill into the tomb. It is never seen again. Jesus had set him free.

Whatever your burden in life, there is someone to carry the load. Two thousand years ago Jesus took our burdens upon him, so that today no one has ever to bear those burdens alone. I remember what Pope John Paul I said just days before his untimely death speaking to a group of disabled people. He said, "The cross without Christ is too heavy to carry." He was right. The good news is that we have a God who takes our burdens upon himself and sets us free.

Jesus can lift your burdens and straighten your backs. He can free you from whatever is holding you back from being the person God calls you to be. He can give you what you need to face tomorrow in the power of God's love – to face your situation courageously

and confidently that God is with you every step of the way. How can I say this? Because with Jesus there are no bent over people, just beautiful people of great worth and dignity, all beloved children of God.

In a junior high school in Seattle, there was a very popular student by the name of Peter who was admired and respected by all his classmates. There was also another student by the name of Eric, a mentally disabled boy, who had recently come to the school from a special school in the city. One day at school, at lunch hour, Eric entered the lunchroom, sat on the floor, opened his bag lunch, and began to eat. After several days of doing this, the other students began to laugh and make fun of Eric.

One day the popular student Peter asked Eric to join him and his friends at their lunch table. After hesitating, Eric did join them and continued to do so every day.

Two weeks later, Peter was sick and was not in school. Eric again sat on the floor, took out his bag lunch and ate. This time some of the boys who sit at Peter's table asked Eric to join them. Eric did sit with them that day and each day after that, and the other students stopped laughing and making fun of Eric. (1)

Somehow I feel that is how Jesus straightens us up when we are all bent over. What that student Peter did was what Jesus would have done. And I hope it is what you and I would have done. The truth is: all of us have burdens too heavy to carry by ourselves. Some of us are crippled by fear. Some of us are incapacitated by loneliness. Others are disabled by guilt or shame. Many are hobbled by grief. Countless others are bent over by circumstances that at times seem to overwhelm us.

Whatever your infirmity, Jesus came to straighten bent over lives, and in so doing he freed us to follow him. He made us beloved children of the Most High God called to companionship with this God forever.

Dr. Gary Nicolosi
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Text – Luke 13:10-17
Proper 16 (21), C

1. Dr. William P. Barker, *Tarbell's* (Elgin, Illinois: David C. Cook Ministries, 1994)