

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹¹And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.(Luke 13:11)

This is a sermon by a fellow with a hurtin' back. Last weekend, I reached awkwardly for some distant stereo speakers in order to lift and move them. And I did it, only I felt a twinge in my back for doing it. And so, for most of this past week, I have just been creaking along, fighting against back spasms, movin' slowly.

So, I happen to know a little of what it means to have difficulty standing and straightening myself. But what is that compared to this poor soul in our Gospel Lesson? She was bent over and could not straighten herself for eighteen years. Eighteen years! That's the age of our son, David, now off to college (God bless him!). That's a mighty long stretch of disability.

Our text says that this woman suffered with a "spirit of infirmity." When Jesus was explaining why he had healed this woman, even on the Sabbath day, he argued that it is fitting always to be merciful, especially to relieve the suffering of someone afflicted by Satan:

¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?"

We do not know exactly what this binding by Satan means except for the obvious sense that the devil, who hates each of us, was hurting this woman in this particular way. Maybe he reached out his cold bony finger and touched her with crippling arthritis. Maybe he laid osteoporosis upon her. The devil probably gets blamed for a lot of things he does not deserve, as when Tom Sawyer would try to explain his

misdeeds by saying "The devil made me do it." But this is a case where the devil really does deserve blame. It does not mean that this woman has done anything wrong. There are many people who love the Lord with all their heart and love their neighbors too, who nonetheless suffer during this dying reign of the devil. This woman could well have been one of them.

In fact, there is evidence in our text that she indeed was a faithful child of God: I mean the fact that she was there in the synagogue. She could have given up. Who would blame her if she had stayed at home, offered her prayers there, but counted herself too worn out to make it to the synagogue. Indeed, who could blame her if her long bout with her disability had embittered her so that she no longer desired to be in that place where the Word of God is preached. But no. Not this one. The time for worship draws near, and there she is, heading off to synagogue.

Imagine her as she moves slowly through the village. Her head is down, her back is bent, as if some heavy ball and chain control her and drive her downwards. If the sky is blue that day and the sun cheery, she cannot lift her face to the sun to be bathed by its warmth. No tan on her face. She is probably pallid.

As she passes by, people look upon her with sympathy, but they do not look upon her with the kind of human joy we often take in noticing someone who moves with grace and freedom and a strong upright posture. That kind of beauty has not been hers for eighteen years.

Also, her infirmity inhibits her good deeds. Just before this morning's reading, for example,

Jesus had told the parable of the fig tree — that tree that bore no figs. In frustration, the owner of the vineyard says this:

Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?(Luke 13:7, KJV)

Well, if the lady with the bent back heard this preaching, who could blame her if she said to herself, “I fear that I am like that. I am a fruitless fig tree. It is so very hard for me to help my neighbor, though I would be glad to do so if I could.”

So, there she is, a daughter of Abraham, faithfully present in the synagogue, but bent down under a yoke of disability for eighteen years.

To this suffering one, Jesus brings immediate help:

¹²And when Jesus saw her, he called her and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your infirmity.”

¹³And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God.(Luke 13:12)

Notice that Jesus does not delay even so long as to ask the lady whether she would like to be healed. In his royal way, he simply frees her from her infirmity. Like a judge releasing an innocent man, Jesus declares her free. And then he lays his hands upon her and immediately she is made straight. Then, the text says, “she praised God.” And I can well believe it.

Saint Augustine taught that in this parable, we see a picture of human destiny: we see a burdened humanity freed by Jesus.

The whole human race, like this women, was bent over and bowed

down to the ground.(*Ancient Christian Commentary, Luke*, pg. 227)

And so it is. Many of you in this congregation are young and strong. But even among you young and strong ones, sometimes you walk toward church with you head bent down. Maybe it is a physical disability. Maybe it is a broken-heart that weighs you down. Maybe you feel that the weight of the world is pressing on your shoulders. Any of us can feel that way — young and strong, old and frail.

But our Lord Jesus is the Lord of the upright, of a humanity that is meant to be free, to hold its head up, to face upwards toward the blue sky and the cheerful sun. And therefore, to every burdened soul, Jesus says this:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.(Matthew 11:28, KJV)

In this morning’s First Lesson, from Isaiah 58, the Lord reminds his people that he cares deeply about the lifting of the yoke from the shoulders of heavy-burdened people:

Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?(Isaiah 58:6)

This is what Jesus does for the poor bent-over lady in our Gospel story. And this is what he means to do for you someday. Do not be discouraged, then, for we will yet walk free and easy and upright.

He is the Great Physician of body and soul, we say. This text reminds us of the body — that he is able and he means to heal our bodies too.

And now this: In the Blessed Sacrament we turn to the one who touches us too — not just in our hearts, but also in our hands. That is, he who long ago laid his hands upon the woman bent over for eighteen years now touches us too

in this Holy Communion. His touch is light — about the weight of a wafer — but let it encourage us and serve for us a sign of that greater touch with which he will embrace us someday and heal all our illnesses.

To this Great Physician be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.