

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Straightened Up and Straightened Out

The title of my sermon this morning is “Straightened Up and Straightened Out.”

“Straightened up and straightened out...” those were actually the two points that Jesus made in a very dramatic way during his sermon in a synagogue. And they are also the two points I want to make in my sermon this morning.

Before we consider the first point in my sermon, however, let’s set the scene in the synagogue. Jesus and his disciples are passing through a town on their way to Jerusalem. Luke doesn’t tell us the name of the town. They spend the night and pause on their journey because it is the Sabbath (it was against the law to travel more than 2,000-4,000 cubits depending on which rabbinic authority you listened or about 1-2 kms on the Sabbath – the legal distance was referred to as “a Sabbath day’s journey”). They go to a synagogue for worship. In the synagogue worship of Jesus’ day, men and women were separated from each other. Men had the centre section, closest to the front; women were relegated to the back or to a little ante chamber. Each synagogue had a ruler or leader who was both the administrative leader and the spiritual leader and as such was responsible for leading worship.

The heart of the worship service was the reading of the Torah (first five books of the Bible), the Nevi’im (Prophets) and the Ketuvim (writings), followed by an interpretation of the reading (what we would call the sermon today). The preacher was always a man (women were not allowed to read or study the Jewish scriptures). On this particular sabbath the synagogue ruler invited the visiting rabbi from Nazareth to read the scripture and give the sermon. Luke doesn’t tell us what text Jesus chose. Perhaps he chose the same text he read when he preached in the synagogue in Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry – the text from the Prophet Isaiah which formed our Old Testament reading this morning:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind;
to set at liberty those who are oppressed;
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

We don't know what passage Jesus read, but we do know what happened during the sermon... As Jesus was giving his interpretation of the passage, he spied a woman who was bent over, unable to sit up straight or stand up straight, her face bearing the results of years of chronic pain and shame. Jesus' heart goes out to the woman, and he calls her to come forward. She obeys, slowly, painfully, making her way down the aisle through the men's section to stand bent over beside the visiting preacher. With tenderness but authority in his voice, Jesus tells her, "Woman, you are freed from your ailment." Then he touches her and immediately she straightens up – the painful frown on her face replaced by a broad grin as she begins to praise God.

Wow! What a sermon illustration! One that perfectly illustrates the first point in my sermon: **that the God who created us and redeems us wants each and every one of us to rise up to our full potential.** You might say that God has given us standing orders! Like the crippled woman in Luke's story, God wants us to stand up straight and tall and rise up to our full stature in Jesus Christ. It's not just nagging mothers or fathers who tell us to stand up straight. It is our heavenly parent who, not only *tells* us, but *enables* us, to stand up straight!

Never forget that. God wants us to be all we can be, whether we are old or young, black or white, able bodied or consigned to a wheelchair. God sent Jesus to free us from all that keeps us down and holds us back. And the Spirit God gives us is the Spirit that lifts us up and straightens us up and enables us to stand tall. The spirit that holds us down and cripples us and stunts our

growth is the spirit of Satan, not the Spirit of God. Never confuse the two. We all struggle against those things that hold us down and keep us from standing tall:

- Maybe it's a crippling habit that promises a "high" but which really stunts our growth;
- Maybe it's a crippling inferiority complex which continuously whispers in our ear, "You're dumb," "You're ugly," "You're good for nothing."
- Or maybe it's an oppressive system that favours one group and is bent on keeping another group down, such as the system of segregation that dominated the political and social life of the Southern states where I grew up.

"Where I grew up..." The tragedy is that if you weren't white like I happen to be, it was difficult to really "grow up" in such a system. Of course, it wasn't just the Southern states that had such oppressive systems in place; Canada did, too, perhaps more subtle, but no less real. The story of Viola Desmond illustrates the segregation that was part of Canadian life. On November 8th, 1946, the 32-year-old black woman decided to go to the Roseland Theatre in Halifax to see a movie while her car was getting fixed. In an amazing act of defiance, she decided to sit in the "whites only" section of the theatre (blacks were only allowed to sit in the balcony). She was promptly arrested and sent to jail.

The next morning, Desmond was convicted of defrauding the province of Nova Scotia of a one penny tax, the difference in tax between a downstairs and upstairs ticket, even though Desmond had asked to pay the one cent difference. Desmond was released after paying a \$20 fine and \$6 in court costs. She appealed her conviction but lost. Who could have imagined back then that seventy-two years later Viola Desmond would be the first woman besides the Queen to appear on a Canadian banknote! Her face now graces the purple \$10 bill, replacing that of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first Prime Minister!

Do you want to see God at work? Look at Viola Desmond, daring to sit in the Whites Only section of the movie theatre, leading the way for people of colour to stand tall and discover a new sense of dignity and a new place in Canadian society. That's God at work! The same God who was at work in that Synagogue in Galilee when Jesus interrupted his sermon and called a woman crippled and bent over, to come forward through the men's section to tell her, "Woman you're freed from your ailment. Stand up straight!" Is there more work to be done to create a more just and equal society? Of course! But the same God who was at work at that synagogue in Galilee over 2,000 years ago and who was at work in that movie theatre in Halifax nearly 75 years ago is still at work today empowering each of us to grow up into our full stature in Jesus Christ and urging us to work together to remove vestiges of racism and sexism from our body politic. Thanks be to God!

But let's return to that scene in the synagogue. The Ruler of the synagogue was not too happy about what Jesus did – indeed, he was "indignant" as Luke says. But he wasn't man enough to speak directly to Jesus. Instead, he took out his anger on the people gathered for worship and gave them a tongue lashing. He was more concerned with straightening them out and keeping things straight and tidy than with enabling them to rise up to their full potential. And he sought to straighten them out by laying down the law:

"Six days you have to work," he said. "You can come on those days and be healed, not on the Sabbath." Echoing the 4th Commandment: "Remember the sabbath and keep it holy. Six days you shall work; the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord."

Whereupon the visiting rabbi had to straighten him out, which is the second point in my sermon and in Jesus' sermon. Sometimes what we need is not so much to be straightened *up*, as it is to be straightened *out*. Sometimes we get our priorities confused. The synagogue ruler

placed proper order and tradition above the real needs of real people. Indeed, as Jesus pointed out, he placed the needs of livestock above the needs of human beings.

And Jesus straightened him out, not by laying down the *law*, but by laying down the *gospel* – the good news of God’s love for all people. “If it’s okay to untie your ox or donkey and lead it to water on the sabbath,” Jesus declared, “how much more to redeem a child of Abraham from bondage?” Furthermore, what better day to be healed and released from slavery than on a day set aside to worship God! After all, the God we worship is the God who sets us free, not the God who ties us up in knots with needless regulations.

Like the synagogue ruler, we often think that the way to straighten people out is by laying down the law. But Jesus knew that what really straightens us out is the gospel, not the law. Consider Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son and elder brother. The prodigal son returns home after spending his inheritance in riotous living. The line he rehearses to himself as he walks back home is, “Father, I’m not worthy to be called your son anymore. Take me on as one of your hired slaves.” But the father would have none of it. He doesn’t lecture his wayward son for how he had erred as the son fully expected. Instead, the father runs to his son as he is walking up the pathway, wraps his arms around him and cries out, “My son has returned home! He was lost; but now he is found!” He then invites his son inside for a big party to celebrate his return.

Meanwhile, the elder brother stays outside, angry and pouting. Once again, the father doesn’t lecture him, laying down the law: “You get in here this very minute, young man! And be nice to your little brother.” No, the father lays down the gospel: “Son, you are with me always and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate today, because your brother was dead but now he’s alive. He was lost but now he is found! Please, come inside and join the party!”

Ultimately, Jesus straightens us out by laying down, not just the gospel, but his very own life on the cross. Why? Because he loves us... because God loves us! God loves every single one of us, and Jesus offered his life for each and everyone one of us. He died for the crippled woman who discovered to her surprise and joy that she had more backbone than she ever dreamed possible. And he died for the indignant synagogue ruler who got his back up and nose out of joint because his priorities had become so twisted. He died for every prodigal son and daughter who has run away from home and for every dutiful son and dutiful daughter who has never left home. He died for every child of Abraham and everyone who never even heard of Abraham. Indeed, he died that we might all be children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. He died to straighten us out and to straighten us up so that we might be set free from all that holds us down and holds us back in order that we all might become all that we can be...in order to grow up into our full stature in Jesus Christ and to stand up straight and tall and give praise to God.

Let us do that now. Let us stand up straight and tall and with heads held high sing to God's glory and praise, "To God be the Glory! Great things God has done!" (#350)

*Sermon preached by Rev. Herb Gale
Knox Presbyterian Church
Guelph, Ontario
Sunday, March 24th, 2019*