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Grace For a Bent Over World

Luke 13:13

C. J. Sansom's novel *Sovereign* tells the story of a 16th century lawyer named Matthew Shardlake. Shardlake is trying to investigate a murder that takes place in the city of York in 1544 just before the arrival of Henry VIII on his progress through Northern England with his retinue of 3,000 nobles, soldiers, and servants. Shardlake is never fully accepted by his contemporaries because of a physical deformity. He is a hunchback. Others see him as a bent over man.

When King Henry arrives in York, Shardlake is part of a delegation of lawyers who are to present to the King petitions from the people for justice. Shardlake is a lawyer from London who has been assigned to assist a lawyer from York in preparing these petitions for the King. In the ceremony the lawyers are to greet the King on their knees and Shardlake hands the petitions to the other lawyer, Master Wrenne, who gives them to the page who places them in the hands of the King. Shardlake describes what happened next:

Amidst the kneeling crowd I felt horribly exposed. The King was so close now that with my eyes cast down I could see the thick fur on his coat stirring slightly in the breeze, the huge rubies set in gold on his doublet. Then the king spoke to Wrenne, "You are a fine looking old fellow. Are they all so big in the North?" I raised my head slightly, daring to glance at Wrenne's face though not the King's. He was smiling up at the monarch, quite composed. "I am not so tall as Your Majesty," he said. "But who may rise so high?" The King laughed heartily, a rich booming sound. "Let all hear," he said loudly, "that I say this good old man shows the North breeds fine fellows. See the other lawyer by his side...I know he is from the south, see what a poor bent bottled spider he appears by his side!" Then as the Yorkers around me broke into sycophantic laughter, I looked up. I must, now the King had spoken to me. (*Sovereign*, pages 215-216).

When the King walked off Shardlake was numb with shock and pain. He knew the mockery of the King would stigmatize him for the rest of his life. The social relationships which had always been so difficult would now be nearly impossible.

In the 13th chapter of Luke we encounter a woman who lived with the same kind of brokenness. Luke tells us that Jesus meets this woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath. She had been crippled for more than eighteen years. She was a bent over woman who only experienced the world looking down. Her condition meant that she was cut off from social relationships. Her experience of loneliness may have been worse than her horrible physical condition.

When Jesus sees this woman he immediately responds with the compassion of God. He calls her over and tells her that she has been set free from her ailment. He lays his hands on her. She responds by standing up straight and praising God. She can now look people in the eye. She is restored to full membership in the community. Her painful isolation has come to an end because of an unexpected encounter with the grace of God.

But the officials of the synagogue are not able to see how God is at work in the world. Jesus' interaction with this woman does not fit their legalistic paradigm of how people are supposed to behave on the Sabbath. They declare that this act of healing is the kind of work that is forbidden on the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue addresses the crowd for the purpose of stigmatizing Jesus and the woman he has healed. He accuses them of crossing the line of acceptable behavior. This is a direct attack on the ministry of Jesus. He is saying that if Jesus were a true prophet he would know that God's people don't behave like this in church.

Recognizing the nature of the attack Jesus points out that there is no limitation on God's compassion for the bent over people of our world. Jesus is speaking the language that the crowd understands. They know down deep that in one way or another they are bent over people too. They also yearn to be set free from that which impedes their fellowship with God and others. As the crowd responds to this word of grace, the officials of the synagogue discover that they are the ones who are put to shame.

What Jesus did in the synagogue that day challenges us to be more attentive to the grace of God which is working in ways that we do not expect or understand. During my vacation I was able to spend two days exploring my family roots in Southern Illinois. I learned that some of my ancestors arrived in Randolph County, Illinois as early as 1806 and that they all had come from Ireland by way of South Carolina. The most compelling discovery was a family secret which has been covered up for more than one hundred years.

The secret has to do with my great-great-grandfather David Ewing. I suppose I should have been suspicious because so little information had been passed down to the family about him. All we knew was that his daughter, my great-grandmother, was born in Randolph County in 1847, that her mother died, that she was raised in part by her grandmother and that her father and older brothers moved on to some unknown place, perhaps to Canada. The secret began to unravel as I read the Session minutes of the Old Bethel Reformed Presbyterian Church. There I found that my great-great-grandfather had been ordained a deacon in 1846. Later I learned that his wife died during the next year and that three years after that he married a widow with three children thereby forming a large blended family. Shortly after this marriage he and his new wife were cited by the Session for problems with the marriage that were not fully spelled out in the minutes. Both were summoned to answer charges before the Session. My great-great-grandfather appeared and confessed his guilt but his new wife did not appear. The Session put off a decision on punishment until the next meeting when the wife was again summoned to appear. The next month she was still not in attendance at the Session meeting. This time the Session took action. The minutes of that meeting read as follows:

On motion David Ewing was deposed from the office of deacon, which was done by the moderator. On motion Resolved that Thursday two weeks be appointed as a day of fasting for the purpose of excommunication.

At this point I had uncovered part of the secret that my generation was never supposed to know. I knew the punishment but I still did not know very much about the offense which led to excommunication. Then I found in a local genealogical library a letter written by the great-grandson of David Ewing's second wife. It said a daughter was born to this couple only four months after their marriage and the Session did not understand. The letter revealed that more tragedy followed. Two and a half years later twin sons were born and soon after that all three children of the second marriage died.

I am convinced that the purpose of the family secret was to protect the family from the shame of the excommunication of an ancestor who had made a mistake. But this story has deeper layers of

meaning for me. It is about church leaders who did not understand the unlimited nature of God's compassion for bent over people. Like the officials in the synagogue of Luke 13 all they knew how to do was to enforce their vision of the rules. To their shame a family still bent over by the burden of grief and the needs of eight children was cut off from the support of the church. But Jesus would have us remember that there are no limits to the grace and compassion of God.