

Sermon – “Unfolding and Unbending”

Sunday, August 28, 2016

Scripture Readings - Jeremiah 1:4-10, Luke 13:10-17

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Our first scripture reading is Jeremiah 1:4-10. In addition to being the longest book in the Bible, Jeremiah provides more information about the personal life of the prophet than any other book. In the story of his call, Jeremiah is assured of God’s presence from the beginning of his life. This was a source of comfort and strength. Just as Jesus encountered opposition from the religious leaders, so did Jeremiah. They questioned his authority and rejected his message. This is the Word of God.

4 Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." 6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 7 But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, "I am only a boy"; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord." 9 Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the Lord said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

Our second scripture reading is Luke 13:10-17. According to Luke, this is the last time Jesus enters the synagogue. On this occasion Jesus not only brings wholeness to a woman who has been bent over for 18 years, he also challenges those whose religious indignation has them so bent out of shape they cannot share her joy. Listen to what the Spirit is saying to us today.

10 Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 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. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 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." 15 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? 16 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?" 17 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.

The title: “Unfolding and Unbending”

The text: “When Jesus laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” Luke 13:13

Let us pray. Holy and Loving God, we thank you for your ability to bend and not to break. Give each of us that same strength and flexibility on the journeys before us. Now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The prophet Hosea describes God as One who *bends and stretches ... to feed, to lift up and to hold the infant. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.*

These words from the prophet Hosea bring to my mind's eye a sculpture by Leon Bronstein of a tall, bronze figure, with very straight, strong legs bending over in an act of incredible flexibility and holding onto another very small bronze figure.

Both the strength, the rigidity of the legs and the flexibility of the figure's body are necessary to reach down, to nurture tenderly and to hold the smaller figure. The ability to bend, literally and figuratively, is not possible unless one is both strong, with a solid foundation, and flexible. How grateful we are that we have a God who is willing to bend on our behalf...and who invites us to bend on behalf of one another.

Dr. George Vaillant, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, describes resilient human beings as those having "both the capacity to be bent without breaking and the capacity, once bent, to spring back." (pg. 44 *The Leader as a Mensch* by Bruna Martinuzzi.) This is particularly helpful, according to Dr. Vaillant, during times of chaos, change and turbulence. Those who have the ability to bend and stretch will be more proactive and persistent, and will not abandon hope.

There is another aspect to our bending that I would like to lift up. Bending is a part of bowing before our Creator in prayer and in reverence. Dr. Belden Lane, who preached at my installation service here at Westminster in 2013, wrote a book entitled *Ravished by Beauty*. In the book he explores Reformed Spirituality, reminding us of our connection with creation and the rich biblical metaphor of trees in our faith tradition. After reading his book, I had a new appreciation for the beautiful, old, oak tree in the front yard of our home in Clayton, Missouri. It was bent over almost touching the ground in search of the sun and became a daily reminder of the importance of reverence and humility in our lives. Recognizing our place within God's creation enhances our ability to bend and to stretch.

Today, once again we witness in our scripture reading the strength and flexibility of God in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. The One who was willing to bend down and join us in our humanity takes the time on this Sabbath to heal a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years.

Eighteen years is a long time to be bent over...it is the time it takes a newborn to blossom into adulthood, it is the coming of age in many societies and may very well symbolize this woman coming into her own. Luke, the physician, attributes her chronic condition to "a spirit of weakness." The word for "weakness" can simply mean "illness." However, her condition can also be seen as indicative of her diminished status within the culture. She is bound up by the limitations and the burdens placed upon her in the customs and laws of the time.

As the story unfolds, we learn that what is almost as important as the healing itself is the fact that Jesus heals on the Sabbath, bending the rabbinic law. In this bold act, Jesus announces that the suffering of a fellow human being takes precedence over obligations related to keeping the Sabbath. Jesus' perspective is consistent with the Deuteronomy understanding of holiness which emphasizes both one's responsibility to honor and to worship God, and one's responsibility to render justice to one's neighbor.

The synagogue ruler who is bent out of shape over this healing on the Sabbath has turned a religious observation that was intended to help people remember and honor the liberation of God's people into a means of social control and oppression. On Jesus' last Sabbath visit to a synagogue, Jesus fulfills the prophesy he read during his first visit according to Luke: *God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, the recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free...*

By healing a person held captive on the Sabbath, Jesus offers freedom and unfolding wholeness and gives the religious leaders an opportunity to recover their sight and see the absurdity and cruelty of unbending laws. The woman is stretched by the new possibilities in her life, but the religious leaders sadly remain bent on rigidity.

William Wordsworth writes:

*How does the meadow flower its bloom unfold?
Because the lovely flower is free
Down to its root, and, in that freedom, bold—*

In the last decade I have developed a deep affinity for sunflowers. Whether traveling through Italy, France or the heartland of America, fields of sunflowers bring a smile to my face. They go on for miles in all directions and the flowers seem to sway and dance together as if participating in a communal act of praise. My affinity for sunflowers was heightened when I came across the song "Mac's Sunflower" by Reverend Will Burhans. Over the years, these lyrics and music have nourished me on days when my spirit has felt bound up and I would like to share it with you this morning.

Sometimes when you find it hard to wake in the morning
and to regard your life with a smile,
look out and see that sunflower try to outshine the summer sky.
When day after day weighs down on your soul
and all you can say is will something please give!
Look out and see the sunflower try to rouse bee and butterfly,
how it glows as it grows spreading its petals wide
to each gray colored day to show its sunny side.
Sometimes when you and I can't win for losing and even pray,
Lord, just let me die. Look out and see that sunflower try to out dazzle bright July.

My friends; today's scripture is good news! To those of us who are bound up and bent over in whatever circumstances within our lives, Jesus offers freedom, blessings and unfolding wholeness.

And, to those of us who are in positions of authority, Jesus calls us into accountability and invites us to bend, to remember our place in creation, and to create environments where people are free, down to the root, and bold to let their lives unfold.

As the carefree days of summer wind down and we return to the routine of school and church life, may we remember together the God who bends and stretches, the God who is both strong and flexible... and may God give us each the strength and flexibility to bend without breaking in challenges before us, the wisdom to live with humility and reverence, and the courage to reach beyond the law in our care for one another and in the unfolding of our lives. Amen.