

Freeing the Bent and Bound

By Linda Rex

August 21, 2022, PROPER 16—Sometimes I long to be able to touch people in the same way Jesus touched them. There's a person I see on occasion at a store I frequent whose physical condition seems to be a lot like the woman in the story for this Sunday in Luke 13:10–17. I long to be able to touch her so she could stand fully upright again.

The woman in the story Luke tells was bent over severely, probably to the place that she could no longer look up or reach up above her. Luke wrote that she had been bound by this infirmity caused by a spirit for eighteen years. I wonder how many times she had gone to the rabbis, hoping one of them might free her from her imprisonment. Was she told that the reason she was crippled in this way was her fault, because she was a horrible sinner or born in sin? Was she excluded from going to the temple due to her condition? In any case, she was in a really bad situation from which she could not extricate herself.

Luke wrote his gospel in an effort to share the good news of what Christ did in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. How fitting is this parable as a picture of what Jesus did for all of us! All of humanity was bound by Satan, doubled over and held captive by evil, sin, and death, unable to free ourselves from our imprisonment.

The Son of God in human flesh, Jesus Christ, came to set humanity free through his sacrificial self-offering. Just as Jesus touched this woman, telling her she was finally free, Jesus touched each of us by taking on our human flesh, becoming sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Jesus set each of us free from all that has bound us, rising from the grave and ascending to the Father, bringing all of humanity home to a right relationship with the Father in the Spirit. He offers us that freedom of evil, sin, and death in his precious gift of the Spirit by faith in Christ.

Just as Jesus was criticized by the synagogue leader for healing on the Sabbath, telling him to only work during the week, we often want to be the ones who tell Jesus what to do with his self-offering on our behalf. We often replace Jesus' finished work with our own religious rules and requirements, our own spiritual practices which may become more important than caring for others. What is more important, Jesus wants to know: keeping yourself religiously pure and "holy" or helping someone be released from years of bondage and suffering? What is more important—observing your traditions and religious regulations, or participating with God in setting someone free?

Growing up in my religious tradition, I was taught that having a good relationship with God meant praying and studying the bible and going to church, along with obeying all of the legal requirements of the Bible. In later years I discovered that loving God and loving my neighbor is central to my identity as a follower of Christ. There are so many ways of living in relationship with God and loving my neighbor that do not involve religious traditions or rituals! Indeed, our love of God is most effectively expressed by our loving, outgoing concern toward others shown by deeds of service, kindness, understanding and compassion. It is in our other-centered sacrificial care of others that we begin to truly reflect the nature and glory of our Triune God as his beloved adopted children.

I've never realized before how often I have been like the synagogue official in this story. Here he had been for eighteen years gathering with the crowd for reading the scriptures and praying together, and working on being holy, and that whole time this woman had been a part of that community. She was suffering acutely and I wonder how many people during that long period of time really touched her in the way that Jesus did when he showed up. She needed the touch of

healing and restoration, but how many people during all those years actually prayed for her or offered her a kind word or reached out to help her?

This year Grace Communion International is challenging us to participate with Jesus in his expression of love and care for those who are suffering or are in need. Our tangible acts of compassion can become an expression of God's love that genuinely touches the lives of others, enabling them to actually experience the love of God in meaningful ways. Rather than simply talking about spiritual things or doing religious deeds, we can intentionally become a part of other people's lives, sharing in their concerns and easing the burdens they cannot carry on their own.

For some of us, this can be a real challenge. Our tendency is to live in cocoons, protecting ourselves from the evil and danger of the world around us. To open ourselves and our lives up to make room for others is a struggle. But by God's grace and his Spirit working in and through us, we can begin to participate with Jesus in touching the lives of those who are bent and bound, sharing the good news that freedom is theirs in Christ.

Who are the people God has placed in your life? Who do you encounter as you go about your daily activities? Are there people you meet at the store or the coffee shop you frequent with whom you can begin to have conversations and pray for or help?

Do you have a unique talent or gift that can be a blessing to others? How can you share it in such a way that you don't do for others what they need to do for themselves, but still bless and help them? What makes you uniquely you and how can you offer that up to make this world a better place in relationships with the people around you?

These are questions I am asking myself as I ponder the next steps in my life. In what way can my faith move beyond religious practice into practical expressions of the love of God in Christ? It is a question worth wrestling with.

Father, thank you for sending your Son to touch us in our bent and bound condition, to set us upright in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Grant us the grace to share your love with others in tangible ways so they might also by your Spirit experience your loving and healing touch, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

"And He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, He called her over and said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your sickness.' And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God. But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, 'There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day.' 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 stall and lead him away to water him? And this woman, a daughter of Abraham as she is, whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, should she not have been released from this bond on the Sabbath day?' As He said this, all His opponents were being humiliated; and the entire crowd was rejoicing over all the glorious things being done by Him." Luke 13:10–17 NASB