



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Our gospel passage shows us of the incredible grace and wonderful power of our Savior. The gospel is about a woman who for 18 long years had a disability that kept her bent over. For 18 years, she was afflicted by a spirit that crippled her, that not only bent her over, but wore her down. She was oppressed all those years by a community that saw her as not being important, a community with expectations and demands that could not be met.

This woman had spent 18 long years being excluded and ridiculed. Some people didn't want to risk being around her. Some thought that she was strange, not beautiful. Some speculated that her condition was God's punishment for something. Perhaps she felt she had to carry the burden of another person's desperate need or the burden of a child gone wrong, a husband who abused her, a mother who expects her to be her primary caregiver, a father who criticizes her every need. Perhaps she was afflicted by friends and family who loved her only if she did what they wanted her to do, and a community that expected her to keep silent about her own woes.

Bent over, crippled, unable to stand upright, in need, this woman came to the synagogue to worship God, perhaps to silently pray for help. Other folks in the synagogue read the lessons and taught, and others prayed aloud to the God who delivered Israel from bondage, to the God who led with cloud by day and fire by night, and brought them into a promised land. A land once again under the rule of strangers. The woman came to the synagogue full of people. People like her, in need. Some of the people did not know just how much in need they were because their outward circumstances appeared to be good. Others, like the bent-over woman, knew their pain but resigned after a year or 18 years or a lifetime, to their condition or their situation.

Many people live their lives bent over because of illness, disease, or accident. We are this bent-over woman and she is bent over, crippled, oppressed by a spirit, perhaps a spirit of self-doubt. A spirit that convinces her that she has no strength, no ability, no purpose. Even though she is a child of Abraham, even though she is one of God's chosen ones, sometimes our emotional state or mental state keeps

us bent over. We allow others to manipulate, intimidate, and even victimize us. When we allow others to have that kind of influence on our lives, we are robbed of life-giving power. We give them power over us when we focus our energy on surviving the next hit, sidestepping the next mind game, or running away from school, neighborhood, or a company bully.

As Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, He sees this woman and discerns that a spirit has oppressed her and bent her over for many years. And in the midst of his teaching, He calls her to come to Him. You might expect that people would be grateful that Jesus could help her, but that is not what happened. The leader of the synagogue, a Pharisee, complained loudly. After all, Jesus had broken Sabbath laws. The Pharisee failed to see that the woman deserved at least as much compassion as the Jewish law extended to lowly oxen and donkeys. He failed to see that he too was bent over, crippled by numerous Jewish laws.

Jesus broke numerous cultural and religious rules or laws in this highly patriarchal culture. Walter Wink discusses six cultures and religious rules. Jesus broke. Jesus spoke to the bent over woman. In civilized society, Jewish men did not speak to women. Jesus called the woman to the center of the synagogue. By doing this, He challenged the notion of a male monopoly that had access to God. Jesus touches the woman, something forbidden under the Holiness code. The code which protected men from a woman's uncleanness and from her sinful seductiveness.

Jesus called her daughter of Abraham, a term not found in any prior Jewish literature. It was believed that women were saved through their men. To call her a daughter of Abraham is to make her a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God. Jesus healed on the Sabbath, the holy day, and Jesus challenged the ancient belief that the woman's illness was a direct punishment from God for sin. He asserted that she was ill, not because God willed it but because there was evil in the world. In other words, bad things can happen to good people.

Jesus laid His hands on the bent-over woman and immediately she stood up straight. When she could finally straighten up her back, what she saw must have been clear. The religious institution was bent over and suffering under the weight of its own laws. What would it be like if the church were known for restoring stature, dignity, community, and honor to people crippled in all the terrible ways the world cripples them?

In the synagogue, Jesus was accused of the unthinkable: doing something meaningful and helpful on a sacred day. But in truth isn't every day a sacred day that can be used constructively to the glory of God? Jesus doesn't stop at freeing the woman. He restores her to community. Her community. At the same time, He

calls on that community to repent of its hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness and embrace her as its own. Not as an object of pity or scorn, but as a daughter, as an heir, as a human being worthy of both love and dignity.

As a people of faith, let us be free from those things that bend us to the point of breaking. Let us not judge or limit the power of God's work in a given situation. Let us not perpetuate customs and rules that keep others in our faith community or in our larger world bent over and broken. Let us express hospitality and inclusion, freedom for ourselves and others. Open our hearts wide with compassion and lead the broken to feel loved and welcomed.

Let us pray. Most gracious God, free us from those things that bend us over in our lives and show us the way to help others find freedom from living bent over. We ask for healing not only for ourselves, but for others, and the courage that Jesus can give.

Amen.