

**February 28, 2016**

**“The Healing of a Crippled Woman: The Freedom to Straighten Up”**

**Psalm 61:1-5, 8 Luke 13:10-17**

**First United Church of Arvada**

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She had gotten used to looking at people out of the corner of her eye, by looking up and sideways. After eighteen years, she could hardly remember any other way of seeing the world. On this particular Sabbath, there was a special excitement at the synagogue, where she regularly went to worship. A Galilean preacher and prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, had arrived in town and would be teaching there. She and the others in town had heard reports about Jesus--how he talked about God's reign arriving soon and how he healed sick people. She was not sure how many of the rumors to believe, but she was trying not to get her hopes up. Her life already had too many disappointments to count.

When she entered the synagogue, the place was abuzz. As Jesus began to teach, however, the room was hushed. Moments later, his words turned from from teaching to invitation. He had caught her eye--no mean feat, given that he had to lean over and incline his head to do so. "Come here," he said to her. She slowly made her way to the front of the assembly. What happened next amazed the whole congregation. "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When this man, Jesus, spoke those words and put his hands on her broken, bent body, she felt power surge through her. Without hesitation, she straightened her once crooked back. She stood tall and praised her God . . .

That is how [Jeannine K. Brown](#) Professor of New Testament at Bethel Seminary in St. Paul, MN retold the story from the point of view of the character of the crippled woman. For 18 years, we are told, this woman had struggled with her crippling condition, which had probably worsened bit by bit, year by year, such that by now, she had fully accommodated to it. It had become her new normal. As we age, many of us do this don't we? We respond to our failing eyesight, our impaired hearing, our lack of balance, and our slower recall by adjusting to these limitations, almost forgetting what good vision, hearing, balance, or memory actually feel like. We may begin to cut out more and more of what we had previously cared about in our lives—people or interests or work. It may affect our sense of independence—our feelings of competence and confidence. Then after successful cataract surgery, new hearing aids, or the use of a cane or walker, we are amazed at the miracle of clear

vision, comfortable hearing or the secure sense of balance that is now available to us. Our confidence is restored and we gain a new sense of freedom.

The woman in our story accommodated to her bent over condition by looking at other people out of the corner of her eye, by looking up and sideways. What a powerful image. We are so often unaware of the perspective from which another approaches the world. We mistakenly assume that we are all looking at the same thing, forgetting how much *how* we see and the place from *which* we see, affects *what* we see. Try this simple exercise, for a moment, to gain the perspective of a child. Get on your knees and notice how high the kitchen counter is or how powerful and unreachable the people towering overhead become. You have no place in their conversation since these “giants” are unaware of your presence, unless, you have the nerve to tug at them or make a lot of noise so that in looking down, they notice you. Imagine, you, like the bent over woman, having to strain to participate in life around you, year after year, by looking up and sideways. People must make an extra effort, to see you, to meet your eye, and many, in fact most, don’t bother to make that effort.

In the middle of his address, Jesus picked this woman out of the crowd--he saw her, took her seriously as a complete and worthwhile human being, touched her and suddenly she was. She was complete and whole to herself. She stood up strong and straight. What euphoria, what freedom!

The biblical text used a curious phrase to describe the woman’s long-suffering condition, describing her as “ a woman with a *spirit* that had crippled her for eighteen years.” This might suggest that this woman’s condition was more than just a physiologically crippling one. Of course ancient understandings did not separate the spiritual and the physical as we do today. Often this led to a prejudicial treatment of those who had a diseased or disabling condition—the deaf, the lame, the blind, the mentally ill, the leper--as if this diseased or disabling condition was the manifestation of a curse. This made the cruelty of rejection and isolation

socially acceptable. But on the other hand, perhaps this ancient awareness of the connection between the spirit and the body was in some way more deeply perceptive. Whether or not the woman's crippled body was actually brought on or intensified by a crippling of her spirit, it is certainly clear that her crippled body did cripple her spirit. As I pictured the bent over woman looking pleadingly out of the corner of her eye, into the face of Jesus, a man imbued with the healing power of deep love, the faces of many others appeared to me as well. The beautiful and filthy face of a young child in a refugee camp, the frightened face of an older man as he is wheeled into an ambulance after a sudden heart attack, the young anxious face of a migrant worker and the tired worn face of the man next to him as they pick in the fields look up out of the corner of their eye as well.

Just because you or I don't experience something doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Just because we don't spend time in prisons or refugee camps, in homeless shelters, in abusive homes, in war zones, or even among the sick doesn't mean that this suffering goes away while we are not looking. We must all be on watch not to be cut off and insular---so completely and arrogantly caught up in our own limited perspective on the world, that we become not only insensitive to another's way of being, but we don't even *see* them anymore.

The Gospels are full of stories of Jesus recognizing and reaching out to people who are rejected by the world around them—the blind, the deaf, the poor, the lame, the widow, the leper, the slave, the tax collector, the gentile, the woman, the sick. He looks into their eyes, touches them, and brings them back to life—to the dignity of their humanity, to allow them to stand taller and straighter in the awareness that they are known and loved.

Some of us, in this church, find the stories of Jesus' healing miracles uncomfortable to hear. We feel the need to listen to them skeptically, recognizing that this or that obviously couldn't have happened and then, perhaps feeling shame or loss or disappointment that we cannot just be believers and claim these miracles as true.

The lame walk, the blind see, demons are cast out into pigs that then hurl themselves into the sea. Come on, really? But what if there is a third way—not cynicism, not gullibility---but simply joy-filled receptivity to the life giving images contained within each story of healing. Jesus spoke directly and individually to a crippled, bent over, woman who should have been lost in a mass of humanity and remained unknown to history. He looked her in the eye and touched her. Though anonymous to others he claimed her as a Daughter of Abraham, as one who belonged. Suddenly, she rose up out of her slump into new life. This image of resurrection is a gift to all the generations that have followed what might have been her easily forgettable life. This image of the resurrection of the body and spirit are given to us to imagine, to ponder, and to seek throughout our *own* lives. Healing happens—healing of body, mind and spirit. Healing of relationships and nations, of depression, of addiction, of hunger, loneliness, despair and grief. Jesus was not an ancient miracle worker showing off his stuff, but a prophetic teacher inviting us into the sacredness of our own lives. We, too, are healers. We are not just given the spirit to *be* healed but to *heal others*. Whether this is visiting someone in prison, speaking out and working to change unjust laws or practices, sending cards or meals to those among us who are ill, warmly greeting a visitor at the church door with a welcome smile, listening to someone's stories of her grief, learning and sharing in Sunday school, or laughing together as we drink coffee after worship. When we walk away from each other, standing a bit taller, physically or spiritually, feeling freer, experiencing the deep peace of real connection, healing has occurred. The stories of Jesus' healing ministry are palpably real. God has given us the gift of the spirit to be healers in our world. What that means and how it takes place will unfold in our lives if we accept the gift and the challenge. It already has. Praise be to God.

Our dear friend and one of the founders of this church came to the end of his three-month difficult journey, yesterday. He died in his sleep in the early morning hours. The doctors did what was possible and his wife and family were by his side all the way. No amount of love or excellent medical care could work the miracle of physical healing against the crippling power of his cancer. But the outpouring of love from

friends, family, former students and colleagues of this beloved former teacher and athletic coach made the last leg of his life journey more bearable and full of moments of light and peace and gratitude and humor. Today, we hold his spirit, his widow and his family in our conscious awareness—we hold him in our hearts and give thanks for his commitment to our faith community.

Psalm 61:2-4 reads “Lead me to the rock that is higher than I; for you are my refuge, a strong tower against the enemy.” When has God’s stability helped you up? A refuge, like a tower, is a place where you don’t just hide—it is a place that lets you see what is coming.

You are invited to come now to the new prayer station in the center table and to build a tower of blocks. Build it strong and then take it apart. No matter how strong we build our towers or how powerfully we secure our safe places, they can easily tumble down. God is the source of real stability. As you build, think about a time or times when you have seen and felt this in your life.