

Proper 16, Year C  
Luke 13: 10-17  
August 26, 2007

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, CA

Repairer of the Breach:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Imagine the scene. Jesus teaching in the synagogue, reflecting on the scriptures. I wonder what his text was. Perhaps he was reading and teaching from Isaiah. He often did you know.

I can imagine him reading from Isaiah, "Is not this the kind of fast I have chosen: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?(Isaiah 58: 6).

The teacher in me imagines what might have been going through his head as he read those words. I can imagine him remembering the people he'd encountered in his life – those living under the yoke of injustice, those bearing the weight of oppression. I can imagine him wondering what examples he might use to bring the text to life. I can imagine him taking a moment to make that shift from text to life.

In that moment he looks up. He sees a woman standing there. Standing bent and broken, all doubled up, her face towards the ground. Perhaps he wonders to himself, "What weighs her down?"

What is it that weighs her down? What is it that makes her bent and broken? What turns her face towards the ground?

Perhaps it's the cumulative effect of years of malnutrition – the toll poverty can take upon the body. Perhaps it's the time spent gleaning in the fields that stooped her shoulders and bent her back. Perhaps it wasn't physical at all. Perhaps her soul ached so that she just couldn't straighten up.

The teacher in me is struck by what he does next. It's really quite amazing – he seizes the moment, the teachable moment.

He calls her over. He says to her, "Woman you are set free from your ailment." He lays his hands upon her, and immediately she stands up.

"Is not this the kind of fast I have chosen: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"(Isaiah 58: 6)

Seeing her, calling her over, laying his hands on her, Jesus breaks the yoke that oppresses. He brings the words to life; and as he does, he brings new life to her.

Look carefully at what Jesus does. He notices her. He notices the bent and broken ones; just as he notices those others have pushed to the margins. He sees that bent over woman as she is. He gets her, he really gets her. He gets what bent her over. We might say, "He understands her context."

But he does more than notice, see and understand. He calls her over. He responds to her pain. He touches her. And in his words and touch, he lifts the weight that bends her over.

In our world, as in hers, there are an awful lot of bent over people, people weighed down by really heavy loads.

Sometimes its fear that bends people over, that weighs them down – fear of change, fear of loss, fear of illness, fear of death.

For some its grief – a grief that's almost more than one can bear. Perhaps you've met that grief. Perhaps you know how heavy the load can be.

For others its chronic pain that wars them down, that bends them over.

Sometimes its that feeling that God has abandoned you that weighs folks down.

Sometimes its just that constant struggle to stay afloat and the myriad of choices folks are forced to make as they try to stretch their income to meet their needs.

For some its the daily grind that weighs them down – the pressures of a long commute, the juggling people do in their daily lives.

As I look at kids going back to school, I wonder if the competing demands of school and sports and family and church don't sometimes weigh them down as well.

And then, and then there are times it's something else, something bigger, something inherent in the structures of society, that weighs people down. I think it's this kind of weight Jesus was confronting when he challenged the leader of the synagogue.

Remember that interchange. The leader of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath so he turns to the crowd, chastising them really,

and says, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day” (Luke 13: 14b).

But how could they do that – how could slaves day laborers – all those dependent on working for their daily wage, barely surviving on their denari a day – take a day off work to come to the synagogue to be cured? What choice did they have? The choice between food and health. That’s some choice.

But that’s not such an uncommon choice even today. Think of the many people in our world who daily face that choice.

What bends folks over? What weighs them down? Sometimes it’s something far bigger than individual pain. Sometimes it’s structures like the holiness code that synagogue leader subscribed to, structures like cycles of poverty that keep folks trapped in the matrix of impossible choices, structures like patterns of thinking conditioned over generations – some that foster ways of doing things that keep those who have always had power in power and others that keep people from looking at the world in new ways.

That’s what Jesus was challenging when he said to the synagogue leader and those who supported him, “You hypocrites.” He was challenging structures that placed preserving order over showing mercy. Listen to his words.

“And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham...be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” (Luke 13: 16)

Look at what he does with just a little phrase. He refers to the woman bent over from years of grief and pain and subjugation as a daughter of Abraham. And in so doing he extends to her the promise of God. What a revolutionary act! The only other person Jesus refers to as a child of Abraham is Zaccheus – the tax collector who cheated many in his day. Think of it – Jesus extends God’s promise, God’s reign to those you and I might be tempted to call unworthy and in the process he challenges all who would have it otherwise.

What has all this to do with you and me? A lot I’d say. We have chosen to be followers of Jesus. Like Mary Magdalene and Peter and John and James and Mary and Martha and Andrew and Thomas and all the others, we have responded to Jesus’ call to follow in his way.

We are called, you and I, to look up, to notice those bent over and weighed down, to see them as they are in all their pain and to see the context of that pain. But we’re called to more than that – we are called to respond appropriately – to address their human needs and the underlying structures that create those needs.

We are called to treat one another tenderly, for we never know what may be weighing someone down. But there's more than that. Our Baptismal Covenant demands of us that we "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being." This we are called to do as individuals and as a congregation.

And when we do, when we actively strive for justice and peace among all people, when we "offer food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted"(Isaiah 58: 10 a), we join with Jesus in lifting the yoke of oppression and in the process become repairers of the breach(Isaiah 58: 12 c).

May God who has given us the will to do these things, give us also the grace and power we need to lift the yoke of the oppressed. Amen.