

“Lessons from Two Bent-Over Women”

September 9, 2007

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Luke 13:10-17

It would be interesting to me some Sunday if we passed out slips of paper, and you wrote on the paper your reason for being in worship that Sunday. As you might imagine, there would be a variety of answers. Some of us would say, “Honestly, I come out of habit.” Some of us would say, “I come for the social aspect, the fellowship, to be with other members of the faith community.” Some of us on our best days, I think, might say, “I come to worship to not only seek the peace of God, I come hoping against hope to experience the presence of the living God, to have an encounter with the risen Christ.”

Even on our best days, however, few of us would have the kind of encounter that the woman in our story did. This is an obscure passage of scripture from Luke about an anonymous woman. At Bible study Wednesday evening we gave her the name “Sally.” Remember, Sally Field does those commercials for Boniva, the anti-osteoporosis drug? This little woman must have suffered from osteoporosis, though they didn’t call it that. She was bent over, maybe with something else, also.

We don’t know what lesson Jesus taught in the synagogue that day. Perhaps he taught a lesson about forgiveness, and this woman who was bent over with some kind of sin heard that and was able to stand up straight. On more than one occasion I have had persons come into my office and visit and unburden themselves of something they had done of which they were ashamed, and literally when they walked out of my office they stood up straight, as if that burden had been lifted. We don’t have a confessional booth in our church, but maybe we should.

This woman was a player in a larger picture. She didn’t realize, perhaps, what all was going on. Jesus was challenging some values that day. One value was the place of women in society. Not many people in the synagogue probably even noticed her. After all, women were just like property, like the cattle and the sheep and the goats. Those who did see her saw her only as she appeared. Jesus saw who she was, a daughter of Abraham, and also what she could be.

There is a lesson for us about the Sabbath. It’s one of the Ten Commandments, but did you know that it’s the longest of all the command-

ments? It's not just "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy," but there's an explanation of *how* to keep it holy. It must be important to God for us to remember the Sabbath.

Then there was a lesson, most importantly, about healing. God offers healing to all. We all need healing, don't we? Don't we come here, each of us, in need of some kind of healing, if not physical, spiritual or emotional? But we know from experience that even though God offers healing to all, not all are healed. Most of you have prayed for someone, a friend or family member. Your prayer seemed unanswered. I say "seemed unanswered" because God answers all of our prayers. It might not be the answer we want. It might not be *when* we want, but still, "Why? Why, God? Why this good person? This young mother with little children, why? Why not heal her?" But not all people are healed. The old preacher Oswald Chambers said, "Faith in healing is not faith in God. Faith in God means trusting and serving God no matter what happens."

We can learn a great deal about faith from a giant of the faith. I call her a giant, but she also was a little bent-over woman, at the end of her life not even five feet tall. You have read in recent weeks, perhaps, about Mother Teresa and the letters that were released that she wrote. We can learn a great deal from Mother Teresa. At the time when she accepted the Nobel Prize she wrote these words:

It is not enough to say that I love God if I do not love my neighbor. In dying on the cross, Christ made himself the hungry one, the naked one, the homeless one. Christ's hunger is what you and I must find and alleviate because Christ is everywhere - in the poor, in our hearts, in the smiles we give, and in the smiles we receive.

Do you remember those pictures of the smiling Mother Teresa? There was another side to Mother Teresa, a secret side, a darker side. She wrote these words just three months before she received the Nobel Prize.

For me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, - listen and do not hear - the tongue moves but does not speak. ... Such deep longing for God - and ... repulsed - empty - no faith - no love - no zeal. ... [The saving of] Souls holds no attraction - Heaven means nothing. ... What do I labor for? If there be no God - there can be no soul - if there is no soul then Jesus - You also are not true.

This was Mother Teresa who wrote these words. Mother Teresa is being considered for canonization as a saint. And then she wrote these words:

Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me?

(Does that sound familiar? “Why hast thou forsaken me?”)
The Child of your Love – and now become as the most hated one – the one – You have thrown away as unwanted – unloved. I call, I cling, I want – and there is no One to answer – no One on Whom I can cling – no, No One. – Alone ... Where is my Faith – even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness and darkness – My God – how painful is this unknown pain – I have no Faith – I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart – and make me suffer untold agony.

So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them – because of the blasphemy – If there be God – please forgive me – When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven – there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives and hurt my very soul. – I am told God loves me – and yet the reality of darkness and coldness and emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul. Did I make a mistake in surrendering blindly to the Call of the Sacred Heart?

And then, finally, these words:

The more I want him - the less I am wanted. ... Such deep longing for God- and ... repulsed - empty – no faith – no love – no zeal. ... Heaven means nothing – pray for me please that I keep smiling at Him in spite of everything.

What can we learn from this bent-over woman? One, I guess, is that she did keep smiling till the very end, in spite of everything. In spite of the important work she was doing when she felt completely alone and abandoned by God, she kept smiling. It says something, I suppose, about the human condition. Mother Teresa wrote about the absent Savior. You understand those words, don't you? We've all experienced the absent Savior. But we have all also experienced His hidden presence.

It says something to us about ministers. I'll tell you this story about ministers if you promise not to laugh too much. A young couple was engaged. They were in a horrible automobile accident and both of them killed, tragically. When they got to heaven they went to God and said, “We never had a chance to get married,” and God said, “That's fine, but you'll need to wait 500 years.” After 500 years, they went to God again and said, “We still want to get married,” and God said, “That's all right, but you'll need to wait another 500 years.” After those 500 years they went to God again and said, “It's been a thousand years! We want to get married.” God said, “You need to

wait 500 more years,” and they said, “Why? We want to get married now.” God said, “Surely, in another 500 years, at least one minister will make it to heaven!” (You said you wouldn’t laugh too much.) Then God said, “If we don’t have one in another 500 years, I’ll marry you myself.”

I promise you, perhaps one reason this means so much to me about Mother Teresa’s letters is that I understand her emptiness, her aloneness. Les Hames could probably tell us about that – Carol and Dan – any minister who walks to this “sacred desk” could share the same story. But Mother Teresa also says to all of us that, in spite of the emptiness, the loneliness, and the aloneness, there is a hidden presence in our lives that sustains and strengthens us for our service.

True story: Several years ago a man who was an atheist began searching for God. He attended several churches in Southern California. He was disappointed in every church he attended. Finally, after the service at one of the churches, he went to a deacon in the church and said, “When do we do the stuff?” The deacon said, “What do you mean, ‘the stuff’?” “The stuff,” the guy said, “the stuff they did in the Bible. When do we do the stuff?”

That’s a good question for us in the church today. When do we do the stuff? The stuff they did in the Bible. When do we offer the healing that God offers to each of us? I’m not talking about anything weird. I’m talking about physical healing, spiritual healing, emotional healing, healing of relationships, healing of marriages and friendships. When will we understand that we come to this place not only to receive healing but to share healing?

I have another “pickup story” for you this morning. Recently I saw a pickup that was owned by some kind of exterminator. It wasn’t Orkin or Terminix or Roto-Rooter, whatever they do - just a local, independent exterminator. He had a wonderful motto on the tailgate of his truck. Printed on the tailgate was this motto: “We kill bugs.” That’s not bad. If you call an exterminator, you want someone to come who will kill the bugs, and if you’re an exterminator, you want to kill the bugs.

In the church we need to hang a shingle outside the door that says “WE HEAL PEOPLE.” That’s what we do in the church. If you agree with that, don’t you think today would be a good day to start? Amen