Sunday, February 24, 1985
FROM BENT OVER TO STRAIGHT
Luke 13:10-17

Someone said to me recently, “Now don’t get all bent out of shape,” in other words, “Don’t get upset or angry so that you can’t handle the situation, or that your life gets out of balance.”

“Bent out of shape” —it’s an intriguing way of describing an individual. Of course, some of us do get physically bent out of shape as well as mentally. If you’ve ever had a problem with your back, a muscle spasm, or some other physical condition, you know that you can get so bent over that it’s almost impossible to straighten up.

Our scripture lesson this morning from Luke’s Gospel is about a woman who was “bent over” or bent out of shape. Luke, who was a physician, describes it this way: “There was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself.”

Why this particular individual was “bent over” or bent out of shape, we do not know. Maybe she was bent over with the problems of the world. Maybe she had some trouble with her spine; perhaps she was crippled with arthritis — we don’t know, but Luke says she had the problem for eighteen years.

Some months ago, I read an article in one of the theological journals I receive about this “bent-over woman.” The article reported that in a women’s Bible study group, the leader asked them, “What in your experience might cause a woman to be bent over for 18 years?”

The answers were instructive. One woman said, “Her children caused her to be bent over for 18 years. That’s the minimum sentence that parenthood brings.” Another spoke up and said, “Don’t forget her husband; she was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks for 30 years.” Still another said that maybe she was tired of working like a slave for a minimum wage or even tired of working like a slave at home for no wages at all.

“Maybe she had a doctorate in economics,” suggested another woman, “and found that nobody listened when she talked about inflation and tax structures, but instead paid attention to some pompous man — even if he hadn’t read a serious book on the subject for years.” “Or perhaps every time she held her head up and tried to be somebody, the people around her, both male and female, did all they could to deflate and diminish her again,” said another participant.

Poverty might have caused her to be bent over. Seventy percent of households headed by women or mothers are poor. Jesus said to the bent-over woman and He says to all of us: “Stand up straight. You are freed from your infirmity.”

Jesus knew that each human being is made up of body, mind, and spirit, and that these are united — they are one. What affects the spirit affects the body. What affects the body affects the mind. What affects the mind affects the body and the spirit — they are all interrelated. Furthermore, we are all interrelated and interconnected with the environment in which we live and with other people with whom we interact day after day.

Therefore, we human beings, women and men, can be “bent over” or bent out of shape for a variety of reasons. There is no mind except a mind which expresses and manifests itself in a body. Similarly, there is no body unless it is animated by a mind. And our spirit expresses itself through our mind and our body.

To say it another way — the physical problems of a person’s life correspond to his or her psychic problems, and both these kinds of problems correspond to spiritual problems. One cannot tend to the body without tending to the mind and the spirit; thus, Jesus always dealt with the whole person.

As I read and studied this story of Jesus healing the bent-over woman, I was reminded this week of what Paul Tournier, a Swiss physician and psychiatrist, had written in his book, “The Healing of Persons.” Tournier wrote: “We are constantly coming across examples of physical attitudes that seem to be symbolic of mental attitudes.”

“There was a case of Ginette. I was called in for an ordinary condition and observed a pronounced curvature of the spine which the school doctor had already noted and for which he had sent her to an orthopedist who had had a leather corset made for her. X-rays showed there was no lesion in the vertebral column. The doctor had said to her: ‘You hold yourself badly; you must straighten up. You see, we are forced to fit an appliance on you so as to stop your lungs from being compressed all the time.'”

Tournier had a talk with her, intrigued by the question as to why a child should stoop like that. He said that he learned that her parents got on together very badly. The father was in the habit of causing noisy scenes at home. Not content with taking it out on his wife, he bullied his children, and the little girl was terrified of him. She no longer dared to speak to him and withdrew into a corner like a hunted beast.

Tournier said that he then realized that the physical attitude of the girl was but the reflection of her moral attitude of fear. Instead of developing happily as a child of her age should, holding her head high and breathing deeply, she shrank into a worried stoop. Tournier then goes on to say— “Look at the people whom you know and see how their attitude, their gait, and their way of standing and sitting reflect their state of mind.”

All these false attitudes, these bodies which stoop because their minds are closed up, have more influence on health than we think. Jesus said to the bent-over woman: “You are freed from your infirmity — stand up straight.” He healed her spiritually and physically.

Probably a lot more conversation took place between the bent-over woman and Jesus than is recorded by Luke’s Gospel. We need to remember that these stories were first passed on and kept alive, and in that process, they are kept very brief — so that just the main points of the story are told.

What are some of the reasons today that you are bent over or bent out of shape? Anger can rob you of your self-control and bend you all out of shape; and worse, it can bend others you are related to out of shape. Guilt, envy, resentment — any one of these can get us “bent out of shape.”

Problems — family problems, work problems, marriage problems — any and all of these can make you feel like you are carrying the world on your shoulders, and the weight of the problems can bend you out of shape.

In a book entitled, “I Know You Hurt, But There’s Nothing to Bandage,” the author, Donald D. Fisher, a physician in family practice, describes case after case of people who are overwhelmed by their problems, which inevitably leads to all sorts of physical symptoms and bends them out of shape. Here is one example:

“Ralph is 53 years old and looks 93. He has built a shrine out of his symptoms and he worships at it daily. The first time I saw Ralph he gave me a 20-minute barrage of afflictions that would wipe out the average army battalion. He had a symptom for every organ he owned. He began to be a medical disaster in his early 20s. Ralph had repeated back surgeries in his 20s for herniated discs. He had surgery on his shoulder joint for chronic pain and bursitis. He had a heart attack at age 34. He had hiatal hernia repair done later.

He complained of pains in every bone in his body. He was bothered with trembling arms and hands, fatigue, insomnia, anginal pain, elevated blood pressure and cholesterol, migraine headaches, and constipation. He sat on the end of the examining table clutching his large back braces and two sacks of prescription medicines he was on. He was downcast, his voice was weak and tremulous, his brow was furrowed. In short, a more dejected, beaten victim of personal conflict than I had ever seen. “He was bent out of shape.

However, unlike the bent-over woman in the Bible story, this man did not want to be freed from his infirmities. Dr. Fisher said that he cut down a lot of the medication that he didn’t need and Ralph did better for a little while. Then he developed inflammatory colitis that ended up with peritonitis and surgery. He was extremely ill. His recovery was fine, but he dwelt daily on how sick he had been and repeatedly said, “I nearly died, didn’t I?”

Dr. Fisher had the feeling that Ralph’s body was accommodating his mental attitude. Ralph had a large business and no diversions. The physician tried to get him to take time off and pick out a hobby, and this helped a bit. He took his first vacation in years, but couldn’t think of a hobby that would interest him.

Dr. Fisher finally told Ralph that his eight-hour days were over; that he could now only work three hours a day. The patient came back looking like a different person. “I had accidentally done the magical thing,” said Dr. Fisher. “I had placed him in a mental wheelchair.” Ralph couldn’t do it himself because, as he repeatedly told me, “My dad told me that I had to work for everything I’d ever get. He really made me independent.”

Independent? He couldn’t be further from it. He is a slave to his work and a slave to his infirmities. He didn’t want to be freed from his infirmities; rather he wanted to use his “bent-over” condition as an excuse.

But the story doesn’t end there. Ralph did beautifully for several months. However, the better he looked and felt, the less concerned the people around him showed about his health. The less concern they showed him, the worse he began to feel. To make himself feel even worse, he finally went back to working long days, six days a week. Then things began to look up for him again. He felt miserable and looked horrible. He didn’t want to be freed from his infirmities. He will be bent out of shape for a long time — maybe until he dies.

Like the woman in the story from Luke’s Gospel, Ralph cannot straighten himself out. He needs to accept help — but for some people that’s difficult, if not impossible. There are those who do not want to be healed — who do not want to change.

For some people, their infirmities become a kind of religion. Their infirmities become a substitute for God. Our need for religion, for something to worship, is so strong that if true religion is not at the center of our life, a false religion will take its place.

It is surprising to see how many strong characters who reject all recourse to divine help in life's difficulties as being the relic of an outmoded past fasten their hope of salvation on some drug simply because it is the product of scientific progress.

Fortunately, the bent-over woman that Jesus met accepted His help and wanted to be freed from her infirmities. She was willing to accept the fact that there are some things we cannot cure ourselves — some things we cannot straighten out without help.

Jesus Christ stands ready to help. In fact, this story from Luke's Gospel expresses Jesus'conviction that this woman had a right to be healed.

So this story says to each one of us — if you are bent out of shape, you can be made straight. The love of God, as expressed in Jesus Christ, will help you do it. But you have to be willing to let go of whatever it is that is bending you out of shape — jealousy, fear, envy, guilt, resentment, or whatever else. Then Jesus will call out and say to you, "You are freed of your infirmity," and you can praise God as did the woman in this story. Amen.