Sunday, May 10, 1992
THE BENT OVER WOMAN
Luke 13:10-17

A friend of mine said to me one day, “Now don’t get all bent out of shape.” In other words, “Don’t get so angry or upset that you can’t handle the situation. Don’t let it get your life out of balance.”

“Bent out of shape"—it’s an intriguing way of describing the mental attitude or response of an individual. Of course, there are those among us who do get physically bent out of shape as well as mentally. Some children and adults, when they are severely criticized or reprimanded, hang their heads and hunch over so their physical shape mirrors their internal feelings. And we get physically bent out of shape for other reasons. If you’ve ever had a problem with your back, a muscle spasm, or a pinched nerve in your spinal column, you can get bent out of shape so that it’s too painful to straighten up.

There’s a story in Luke’s gospel about a “bent-over” woman who came to Jesus for help. Luke, who was a physician, describes her this way: “There was a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.” Note especially that Luke says, “There was a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years.” Her physical shape may indeed have been a mirror of her internal life, her broken spirit.

Every time I read this story from the ministry of Jesus, I think of my own mother, who died almost 22 years ago in August 1970, at age 66. She was a bent-over woman for most of her life because of a bone disease that was discovered when she was 15 years old. In my mother’s case, it was not any spirit that crippled her, but something completely physical. If anything, it was her spirit that saved her. In those days, medical science had no idea what the bone problem was, and thus there was no helpful treatment. Despite this, she became a public school teacher at age 18, taught in a one-room rural school for four years, and was married at age 22, having seven children during the next 20 years. In addition to being an active homemaker, wife, and mother, she was a tireless worker in the church and community. As we children were growing up, we never thought of Mom as being bent over, and she never thought of herself that way. But as she grew older, her bones weakened, and it affected her physical posture. She became more bent over, but not in her spirit.

Why this particular woman that Luke describes was bent over or bent out of shape, we do not know. Maybe she was burdened down with her personal problems. Or perhaps there was trouble with her spine, or she was crippled with arthritis. Whatever it was, it had been with her for a long time — 18 years.

Several years ago, I read an article about this bent-over woman in one of the theological journals I receive. 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 mother 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 woman said, “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, and most of them mothers, are poor.”

Since reading those comments from that women’s Bible study group, some additional reasons have come to mind that could have caused the woman mentioned in Luke’s gospel to be bent over. And all of these are related to being a mother.

It’s possible that the woman was bent over because she was a single parent with two or more children. That’s quite a burden. Being a nurturing mother when there are two parents is, in itself, a difficult task.

Maybe she was a stepmother, a woman who had her own children, and after her first husband died, she married another man who had children from a previous marriage. Putting two families together is not easy. We’ve all read stories about stepmothers who are described as being mean, especially to their stepchildren.

Or maybe this bent-over woman was a grandmother who, after raising her own children, was now having to raise her grandchildren. I read somewhere not long ago that up to 40% of the children in our present society are being cared for by their grandparents.

There’s also the possibility that she was bent over because of the abuse of her husband. Being a physically and mentally abused wife is not something new in our time.

Or she could have been a woman whose husband divorced her because he found someone else and left her to care for four young children without paying child support. That could cause a mother to be bent over.

Whatever the cause of her bent-over condition, this woman, this mother, or grandmother found help from Jesus. Jesus said to her, “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 they are united, interconnected — they are one. What affects the human spirit affects the body. What affects the body has its result on the mind and spirit.

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 or spirit except a mind or spirit that expresses and manifests itself in a body. Our spirit expresses itself through our mind and body. Thus, Jesus always dealt with the whole person.

Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss physician and psychiatrist, writes about physical attitudes that are symbolic of mental or spiritual attitudes in his book The Healing of Persons.

There was the case of Ginette. Tournier was called in for a seemingly 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 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. This corset will help you and will stop your lungs from being compressed all the time.”

In talking with Ginette, Tournier learned that her parents were arguing and fighting in front of their children most of the time. The father, not content with taking his anger out on his wife, also bullied the children, and Ginette especially was terrified of him. She no longer dared speak to him and withdrew into a corner like a hunted animal.

Tournier said that he began to realize that the physical attitude of the girl was but the reflection of her mental 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. She needed a new environment if she was to stand up straight.

Tournier wrote: “Look at the people you know, and see how their attitude, their walk, and their way of standing and sitting reflect their state of mind.” We like to call this “body language.”

Jesus said to the bent-over woman, “You are freed from your infirmity. Stand up straight.” In other words, “You have value, and the physical act of standing up straight will have an effect on your spiritual attitude.”

No doubt a longer conversation took place between the bent-over woman and Jesus than is recorded in Luke’s gospel. And what all was said, we can only surmise. But we do know that because of her meeting with Jesus, this woman — this mother and maybe grandmother — began to be a new person. She gained self-esteem. Here was a man who treated her as someone who had worth. He gave her new confidence in herself. Jesus let her know with his words and his actions that God loved her equally with other human beings. The Bible says when Jesus laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

I believe that she was now able to stand up straight because Jesus let her know with his own caring, nurturing spirit that “mother” is as much an appropriate metaphor for God as is “father.” After all, Jesus knew the Old Testament. He was aware, for example, that in the prophet Hosea, God is compared to a Hebrew mother who teaches the child to walk, heals the child’s wounds, and feeds the child.

In the traditions of Exodus, God provides for those necessities that were always obtained through women’s work — food and water. In the prophet Nehemiah, God is a seamstress, as in the book of Genesis, where God makes garments to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Isaiah speaks of God as having birth pangs and also describes God as a mother comforting her children. In another place in the Old Testament, Jesus knew that God’s remembrance of Zion is compared to the love of a nursing mother and the work of a midwife.

Maybe in his conversation with the bent-over mother or grandmother, Jesus reminded her of this part of her Old Testament heritage. He helped her to understand that she could stand up straight because, like a mother, God continually gives birth to life.

So, to all the mothers, stepmothers, single mothers, grandmothers, and mothers-in-law who are here today or who are listening on the radio or watching on television and who feel bent over or weighed down, let go of whatever it is that is bending you out of shape and stand up straight. God is not finished with you yet. Amen.