Sunday, August 26, 2001
FROM BENT OVER TO STRAIGHT
Luke 13:10-17

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

“Bent out of shape” is a very descriptive way of describing the mental attitude or response of an individual. Some children and adults, when they are severely criticized or reprimanded, hang their heads and hunch over, so their physical shape mirrors their emotional state.

Of course, there are those among us who, because of an illness such as osteoporosis or some other bone disease or accident, are physically bent out of shape rather than mentally. 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 very painful to stand up straight.

In the scripture reading for today from Luke’s gospel, there’s that story about a “bent-over” woman that Jesus met while he was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Luke describes her as having “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, “She had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.” Her physical condition may indeed have been a mirror of her internal life, a wounded spirit.

Every time I read this story from Luke’s gospel, I think of my mother, who died in August 1970, 31 years ago, at age 66. She was a bent-over woman for most of her life because of a bone disease that began when she was 15 years old and got progressively worse. In my mother’s case, it was not any kind of broken spirit that caused her to be bent over; if anything, it was her positive outlook on life that saved her. In those days, medical science had no idea what her bone problem was, and so she found no helpful medical treatment. In spite of this, she became a public school teacher at age 18, upon graduation from high school. She taught in a one-room schoolhouse for four years and was married at age 22. During the next 20 years, she gave birth to seven children and was a dedicated, loving mother and wife, in addition to being an active church and community volunteer.

As we children were growing up, we never thought of her as being bent over, and she never thought of herself that way either. It’s true that her bones weakened and it affected her physical posture, but not her spirit. In fact, because of her gentle, positive, and loving spirit, most people, when they met her, never noticed her physical condition. She truly lived from the inside out.

Why this particular woman that Luke describes was bent over, or bent out of shape, we do not know. All he tells us is that she had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. Maybe she was burdened down with personal problems. Or perhaps there was trouble with her spine, or she was crippled with arthritis or osteoporosis.

It’s interesting to think about the possible cause of her bent-over condition. I remember reading an article about this bent-over woman in one of the theological journals I regularly receive. This article reported that in a women’s Bible study group, the leader asked, “What in your experience might cause a woman to be bent over for 18 years?”

The answers were creative and revealing. One mother said, “Her children caused her to be bent over for 18 years. That’s the minimum sentence that parenthood brings.” Another woman said, “Don’t forget her husband. She was probably permanently bent over from picking up his dirty socks.”

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 spoke her mind, someone, men and women alike, did all they could to deflate and diminish her again,” said another participant.

“Poverty might have caused her to be bent over,” said someone else. “Seventy percent of single-parent households are headed by women, and most of them are poor.”

You can be creative with this story from Luke’s gospel and speculate on some other causes of her bent-over condition.

Maybe she was a single parent with two or more children, and child support payments were always behind. Her husband could’ve divorced her because he found someone else. Being a single parent is quite a burden. Being a nurturing mother when there are two parents is, in itself, a difficult task.

It’s possible she was a stepmother, a woman who had her own children and, after her first husband died, married another man who had children from a previous marriage. Putting two families together is not easy.

Or maybe this bent-over woman was a grandmother who, after raising her own children, was now having to raise her grandchildren. More and more children today 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.

Whatever the cause of her bent-over condition, Jesus noticed it and said, “You are free from your ailment.” He could’ve also said, “Stand up straight. You are created in God’s image. You are a child of God. Therefore, you have as much worth and value as any human being on earth.”

We are made up of mind, body, and spirit, and they are all united, interconnected — they are one, a unity. What affects the human spirit affects the physical body, and the opposite is also true. What affects the body has its result on the mind and spirit. Therefore, we human beings can be bent over or bent out of shape for a variety of reasons. Years ago, Dr. Paul Tournier, a Swiss physician and psychiatrist, wrote about physical attitudes that are mirrors of mental and spiritual attitudes and environments 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 Ginette. She no longer dared speak to him and withdrew into a corner like a hunted animal.

Tournier began to realize that the physical attitude of the girl was but a 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 and a new attitude 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.”

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

No doubt a longer conversation took place between the bent-over woman and Jesus than is recorded in Luke’s gospel. What else was said, we can only speculate. But we do know that because of her encounter with Jesus, this woman — maybe she was a mother and even a grandmother — began to be a new person. Luke reports, “When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.”

But some of those who saw what happened didn’t like it. Luke tells us that the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

Notice especially that the leader of the synagogue in this case didn’t say anything directly to Jesus. Rather, he criticized the people, and especially the bent-over woman, for giving Jesus the opportunity to heal. In essence, he was saying to the woman, “It’s all your fault. If you hadn’t been here today, the Sabbath law would not have been broken.” We call this “blaming the victim.” It’s a common practice. A woman is assaulted, and the critics say, “It’s all your fault. You tempted the one who assaulted you.” Here is a woman who is healed and is praising God, and she is criticized for doing so.

At that tense moment, Jesus looked at the leader of the synagogue and his other critics and said, “You hypocrites!” These critics would not think twice about rescuing a farm animal on the Sabbath, but they have trouble rejoicing when a bound woman is set free.

Something is wrong with this picture. What better place could there be to experience the healing power of God than on the Sabbath and in the synagogue? If the Sabbath day is holy, what is more holy than being compassionate and experiencing God’s compassion?

It wasn’t wrong for the leader of the synagogue to want to protect the Sabbath day and worship from the intrusion of regular work. But in the context of this miracle, the leader appears silly

and shriveled; being indignant at mercy and goodness looks ridiculous. What is missing is the delight in seeing someone healed.

Jesus called the leader and his critics “hypocrites.” The original meaning of that word in Greek, from which it originates, is “actor” or “actress.” It was used to refer to a person who plays a part on stage, pretending to be someone they are not.

Now Jesus uses this word in a different context. He was saying to his critics, “You are acting a part. You are pretending to be something you are not. Worse still, in this case, you are not even aware you are pretending.” The actor or actress on stage knows they are playing a part, and the audience knows it. But Jesus’ critics were deceiving themselves and others. Outwardly, they were models of religious and moral conformity. But inwardly, they were self-centered creatures who had missed the whole point of the law. They had lost the spirit of the law in their complicated network of rules and regulations. They were the ones who were bent over and in need of straightening, but they did not know it.

There are two kinds of hypocrites — the good and the bad. There are times when the best thing a person can do is to act a part, whether on stage or in real life. For example, a mother goes into the sickroom of a child who is on the brink of death. Day after day, she enters that room with a calm and confident demeanor, reassuring the child that everything will be all right. Inwardly, she is troubled and anxious, but outwardly, she maintains her composure for the sake of the child. It isn’t until years later that the child, now grown up, realizes what a heroic part the mother played and what a blessing it was that she could act that way.

This story about being bent over and then straightened applies to all of us. We are all bent over in one way or another and in need of healing. You could be in danger of being the wrong kind of hypocrite. Sometimes you are acting a part that isn’t truly you. If you are doing it to help another person, God bless you. If you are doing it to act yourself into a new and better way of thinking, God bless you. But if you are doing it blindly, out of self-righteousness, or because you fail to see the larger picture and don’t recognize God’s mercy at work, then beware! In that case, you are bent over and need to be made straight. Amen.