Sunday, August 22, 2004
BLAMING THE VICTIM
Luke 13:10-17

The reading from Luke's gospel for today begins with an extraordinary story about a "bent-over" woman who appears in the synagogue where Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath. Luke describes her in this way: "And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent-over and 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.

A person's physical posture can sometimes reveal an inward attitude. You've heard people say, "Now don't get all bent out of shape." In other words, don't get so worried or upset that you can't handle the situation. Don't let your life get out of balance. "Bent out of shape" can be a very descriptive way of explaining the mental outlook of an individual, which is then revealed in their physical posture. Some children and adults, when severely criticized or reprimanded, hang their heads or hunch over, so that their posture reveals their internal attitude.

Of course, there are those individuals who, because of an illness such as osteoporosis or some other bone disease or accident, become physically bent-over. If you've ever had a problem with your back, a muscle spasm, or a pinched nerve, you can get bent out of shape so that it's very painful to stand up straight.

Why this particular woman who came to the synagogue where Jesus was teaching was bent-over is not known. All Luke tells us is that she had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. Maybe she was worn down by personal problems, a child gone bad, or an abusive husband, or extreme poverty, or desperate loneliness.

Whatever the cause of her bent-over condition, Jesus noticed it and said, "You are free from your ailment." He could also have said, "Stand up straight. You are created in God's image. You are a child of God. You have as much worth and value as any human being on earth." Then Luke states: "When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."

But some of those who witnessed the event didn't like it. Again, here's how Luke describes it: "But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured a person 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 he did not say anything directly to Jesus. Rather, he criticized the people, especially the bent-over woman, for giving Jesus the opportunity to heal her on the Sabbath. He was, in effect, saying to the woman, "It's all your fault. If you hadn't been here today, the Sabbath law would not have been broken. There are six days on which you could've come to be healed. Come back during normal office hours." He blamed the victim.

At that tense moment, Jesus looked at the leader of the synagogue and the other critics and said, "You hypocrites. You would not think twice about rescuing a farm animal on the Sabbath, yet you have trouble rejoicing when a woman is healed."

It's significant that Jesus called his critics in this instance, "hypocrites." The original meaning of that word in the Greek language from which it originates is "actor" or "actress." It was used to refer to a person who plays a part on the stage, pretending to be someone else.

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 doing this. The actor or actress on the stage knows that he or she is acting a part and the audience knows it. But you are deceiving yourselves and others. Outwardly you are models of religious and moral conformity. But inwardly you are self-centered creatures who have missed the whole point of the law. You have lost the spirit of the law in your complicated network of rules and regulations. You are the ones who are bent-over and need to be straightened, but you do not know it."

That's the first point the story makes — you could be bent-over and need to stand up straight and begin praising God.

There are several other issues in this story that are still relevant today. One has already been mentioned — blaming the victim. It's always a temptation. A woman is assaulted, and the critics say, "It's all her fault. She tempted the one who assaulted her." An automobile is stolen, and the owner is blamed. "He should've locked the car." I remember during the civil rights demonstrations in the 1960s especially, critics kept saying, "It's all the fault of the demonstrators who are opposed to segregation laws. They should keep quiet and mind their own business. If those who were being discriminated against would keep quiet, they would gain their rights in due time." The same was said of those who supported the right of women to vote in this country. It's always a temptation to blame the victim.

Another issue dealt with in this story is this: when you have a rule or a law, what exceptions are allowable? You can be so concerned with keeping the letter of the law that you forget its overall purpose. If you have a rule against working on the Sabbath, then the question always comes up — what is work?

An article last week in the Wall Street Journal dealt with this question for Orthodox Jews in today's world. Because of the biblical prohibition against working on the Sabbath, Orthodox Jews must close their stores from sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening. But does that also apply to their websites? These can run automatically on the Sabbath.

Because of the rise of electronic commerce, that question has been brewing in Orthodox Jewish circles. The commandment against work on the Sabbath never anticipated this kind of new technology. According to the story in the Wall Street Journal, a respected Rabbi who is the recognized expert on the prohibition against working on the Sabbath has ruled that websites operated by an Orthodox Jew can remain open only "if the shopping cart on the website is shut down, ensuring that no actual transactions take place." Customers can look but not make any purchases.

This is based on an earlier ruling that Orthodox Jews who own vending machines must lock those machines on the Sabbath because even though the owner isn't present to make the exchange, he still collects the money and therefore he is technically working on the Sabbath.

The Rabbi who made this ruling travels around the world certifying everything from ovens manufactured by General Electric Co. that can be programmed to go into a "Sabbath mode,"

meaning that food can be automatically warmed up on the Sabbath without touching any buttons, because that would be doing work. The news article also gave the example of one very creative Orthodox Jew who worked out a legal arrangement in which he automatically transferred ownership of his business to a gentile each week on the Sabbath so the business could stay open from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday.

What is work, and what is not work? What activities are allowable on a holy day and what are not? When Jesus healed a woman on the Sabbath, was this a glorious manifestation of the compassion and power of God as revealed in him and therefore did not violate the Sabbath commandment? Or was it a wanton expression of disregard for the traditions of God's people and a shameless violation of the sanctity of the Sabbath?

When I was studying this story this past week, it reminded me of an old baseball story about a dispute involving an umpire, the catcher, and the batter. A pitch came over the plate in the vicinity of the outside corner. "That's a strike," declared the catcher to the umpire. "You're crazy," responded the hitter, "it was outside. That's a ball." Then the umpire said, "It ain't nothing until I call it."

That story can be told to illustrate the authority of the baseball umpire. It's also a story about perception. There are things that happen in life in which what you choose to call a thing determines what it is to you. All of you know that when you see a glass half-filled with water, you can say it is "half full" or "half empty." It's a matter of perception. I've mentioned before in sermons that there's a third alternative — the glass is too big.

From the point of view of Jesus in this story from Luke's gospel, if the Sabbath day is holy, what could be more holy than being compassionate to a human being in suffering and experiencing God's compassion?

On the other hand, you can also appreciate the leader of the synagogue's desire to protect the Sabbath day commandment.

Still another issue this story illustrates, which is still relevant today, is: what constitutes faithful religious living? Is following the rules to the letter of the law the most important test of your religious faith and life? You could read the story and be tempted to conclude that anyone who believes that following rules to the letter of the law is wrong, while those who are open and spontaneous are right. But that sets up false alternatives. You can have deep respect for the rules and traditions and also allow for exceptions and new interpretations.

Remember, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He was respectfully participating in the tradition in which he was raised. He was an observant and pious Jew. And after he healed the woman and had been challenged for doing so, he made his defense through a rabbinical argument. He pointed out that his actions were not outside the law in keeping with the most reasonable interpretations of it. What is the purpose, the function, the intent, the true spirit of the law? That's the most crucial question. What could possibly be wrong in healing someone on the Sabbath who has been bent-over for 18 years? These are the questions that underlie his healing of the bent-over woman.

In another incident where the same issue was being discussed, Jesus reminded his critics that "the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath."

To some people intent on keeping the letter of the law, and who might even agree with his interpretation, his actions were still shocking because he crossed other boundaries. He talked with a woman in the synagogue, which was not customary. He touched her. That was shocking. He surprised and amazed those present who probably knew her as a bent-over woman for 18 years. Some of the people who witnessed the event could've believed that she deserved to be bent-over because she had been living an ungodly life.

I especially like the way the story ends. When the people heard Jesus' defense of his actions in healing this woman on the Sabbath, Luke says, "The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing."

They chose rejoicing over being critical. They chose the spirit of the law over the letter of the law. Our world needs more rejoicing of this kind. During this past week, in the evenings when I've had time, my wife and I have been watching the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece. On Friday evening, August 13, it was invigorating to watch those colorfully costumed athletes parading into the Olympic stadium. They were only a small sample of the world's 6.3 billion people. There were about 10,000 athletes from 202 countries. There was a lot of rejoicing going on.

I know there is a lot of trouble and suffering in the world, but there's still room for rejoicing. Praising God and rejoicing in the good fortune of others is always a good thing to do. Amen.