

Exploring the Scriptures:  
Sabbath

August 22, 2010      Luke 13:10-17  
by Blair Odney

This morning I'm thinking about two colleagues in ministry. One is Jana Childers, Dean of San Francisco Theological Seminary and professor of preaching. I studied with Jana Childers at Vancouver School of Theology one summer, who helped her students remember to place themselves in stories like the one we heard this morning. She has helped me to see this story particularly, with fresh eyes.

The other colleague is a pastoral minister from the prairies whose name is George. George served in ministry in the United Church, ordained in about 1945, married in about 1950, and retired in about 1985. With no children to distract him, George was married both to his wife and to his ministry, although he used to say he never thought he was very good at either. For those who do not know, when ministers are first ordained, they are sent by the church to go where the church thinks there is the greatest need. It's called settlement. Freshly minted preachers in the order of minister are settled in a pastoral charge, often not of their own choosing. And in his first job, George was settled to a five point pastoral charge (that's five separate churches, in five different towns) in rural Manitoba. He stayed five years...and he told me it was the hardest work he had ever done. He said these were the craziest, most mixed up, and conflicted groups of people he'd ever worked with, before or since.

Somehow, it was here, that George developed his self-image as a minister; often he would tell me he was a lousy preacher, he wasn't very good with children, he wasn't very good in bible study and he lacked the personal charisma that he used to think was required of the job. As he began to believe this stuff about himself, George's ministry played out exactly as the way he imagined himself to be in his ministry. He wasn't very good at preaching. His extemporaneous prayers were awkward and uncomfortable. People felt uncomfortable coming to him with their problems and his bible studies were boring. Children were just plain afraid of George, most likely because he was just as afraid of them.

When I met George, he was involved in the pastoral care program of his church. As a volunteer he gathered weekly with friends to pray for members of his congregation. He joined the weekly bible studies prepared by his minister and he was part of the hospital visiting team. Even though he had retired years earlier, he was continuing in the ministry that he never thought he was very good at. Oh, he was faithful, and he was steadfast; always the first to visit a member of the congregation in the hospital, but it never seemed to me that these were life-giving experiences for him. It was like he had never been anything but a minister and it was a call that he never felt good about.

Each time he spoke of his ministry to me, he always believed it to be inadequate. And there he was, in his retirement, continuing to do something that seemed to suck the energy from him, only because it was something he had always done.

It won't surprise you to hear that as he got older, George's spine became more and more curved. He was weighted down, bent over with arthritis and pain, asthmatic, no longer able to drive, mired in unmanageable grief. The minute he talked about his wife who had died a number of years before I met him, his tears were right there.

As I hear this story of the bent over woman, I am reminded of George. Can there be a more poignant picture than to see someone carrying the burdens of their world and whatever they believe about themselves upon their backs. This is a very short story in the gospel of Luke and yet the images present a powerful understanding of a life of faith.

The writer of Luke's gospel is not mincing words. In four or five very short verses, he is painting a picture of transformation. The original word in Greek used to describe the woman is more than bent, or bent over. The Greek word used here, would more accurately be translated as "bent in" or "bent with." This is a woman who not only carries the burden, the burden is part of her; it has formed and reformed, deformed her body. She is not just a woman with an infirmity. She is a woman with the Spirit of infirmity - everything about her and whatever she believes about herself, whatever emotional or physical burden she carries - her body has conformed to that image. Her body has conformed to the Spirit of infirmity.

Jesus notices the woman. He's teaching in the synagogue, likely a group of men, and he sees this woman with the Spirit of infirmity, her body bent to conform to her own self image. Of course Jesus would notice her. Of course he would interrupt himself to speak to the woman. This is Jesus. The one we follow has always placed himself intentionally; he stands with the cast away and the marginalized. I imagine him stopping himself mid-sentence, graciously excusing himself from that gathering of men, calling to the woman.

Imagine it. I think the woman was stunned. Bent to conform to her own self image (think of George here, continuing to undertake a ministry that consistently reminded himself of his own inadequacy), I think the woman would have been absolutely flabbergasted that Jesus would have noticed her, let alone spoken to her. And he calls her near to him. A young Jewish rabbi, wise, clever, popular is actually speaking to her.

She draws near. She comes close to Jesus. She must have drawn close enough for Jesus to touch her. But think of the image. (move from the pulpit and describe it)

- She would only be able to see from chest down.
- He would not be able to see her eyes.

- Remember the words he says to her: “woman, you are set free from you ailments.”
- And we know that he lays his hands on her.
- Would Jesus be standing over her? Would he say those words without looking into her face?
- Does anyone else see Jesus down on his knees looking up at the woman? He might even be weeping.
- Does anyone else see Jesus laying hands on her from this position....where would he have touched her? Jana Childers thinks from this position he must have touched her feet. Now the text doesn't say he used his hair to caress her feet like Mary did to Jesus. But it would not be out of character would it. He did wash his disciples' feet.
- I could see it...I could actually see how Jesus looks up and meets the woman where she is, touches her feet and she is instantly freed, she stands up and begins praising not Jesus...she begins praising God.

Is there any wonder the worship leader in the synagogue that day was some honked with what was going on. Jesus was stealing his thunder. The real action wasn't happening up front where the worship leader of the day was doing his thing. The real action was happening where Jesus lifts burdens, where Jesus looks into someone's eyes and sees them...and loves them anyway. The worship leader may have been honked that Jesus was working on the Sabbath; for the bent over woman, this is likely the first “Sabbath” she's experienced in 18 years.

You have heard me toss around the idea we create our own experience. Made in the image and likeness of God, we have been gifted with the power to create, and I've wondered about our own capacity, power, to create our own experience. As I think about George and the bent over woman, and see how their bodies have conformed to the image they have come to believe about themselves, I'm wondering if they have had the power to create their experience. I wonder if this isn't also true for each of us.

In her book *Anatomy of the Spirit, Why People don't heal and how they Can*, Carolynn Myss writes that people's biographies become their biologies. Your biography becomes your biology. The stories we tell about ourselves, the stories we believe about ourselves become reflected in the health or the dis-ease of our bodies. Our bodies carry the stories of our living. In the image from the lesson this morning, we become conformed by the Spirit of whatever story we believe about ourselves; inadequate or powerful beyond measure. As the idea lives in our thoughts, our bodies conform to the image. Even though my friend George could spew the words Jesus saves, or God loves you, his body betrayed that message. George's own self talk was more powerful than a lived experience of grace, and permission to not continue doing what he was doing.

The outcome is very different for the bent over woman. She let Jesus look into her eyes, and see her, love her, and touch her. And she ended up praising God...restored, unburdened. The story says she immediately stood up. I believe we can be restored, transformed, regardless of what may or may not happen in our bodies.

Every day of our lives, I believe we are gifted with a choice; a choice that is always before us. Like George, we can continue to be mired in the experience that perpetuates our own self talk...bending us into the shape we believe about ourselves.

Or we can be like the woman. We can hear the words of the gospel this morning, hearing the very same gospel say to us, "come near." We can let the eyes of grace, and healing, and forgiveness gaze upon us, even though our self-talk might contradict these words. And we can let the hand of healing, touch us where we most hurt and trust that we no longer have to carry the burdens, bodies bent with the Spirit of infirmity. We can put the old, the familiar and the destructive self image, down.

My hope is that this is the option we choose. May we receive the same gifts from the same living gospel and experience real Sabbath for the first time in a very long time. And more than anything else give thanks. Amen.