

Lectionary 21C Pr 16
Grace Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL
August 21, 2022

Is 58:9b-14
Psalm 103:1-8
Heb 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Grace to you and peace from God and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Nearly all of our Gospel readings this year are found in the Gospel of St. Luke. Next year will be St. Matthew. We started with the Christmas story and then followed along as Jesus gave his first sermon in the synagogue, called his disciples, and began his public ministry – healing and touching and loving and teaching. A few weeks ago we reached the pivot point in the Gospel when we read in Chapter 9 that Jesus set his face like flint and set out for Jerusalem. And our recent gospel readings are accounts of what happened as he traveled. So too, today.

Jesus was in a town, had been asked to preach and teach in one of the synagogues. And there was a woman there who was suffering greatly because she was so severely bent over that she could not stand up. We don't know more about her than this. Jesus saw her and reached out and touched her and she was healed and she glorified God. The grace and love of Jesus healed the bentness with which she suffered.

So, I got to thinking about “bentness” – the things in our lives that impair us, the things that keep us from seeing what is happening around us, the things that stop us from seeing the goodness of God's grace. Certainly there is “bentness” that involves our physical bodies. Yet this is not about which infirmity or disability is worse, which causes the most difficulty. No. And then I got to thinking about the “bentnesses” that are not physical – could be mental illness of any kind – depression or anxiety or psychosis or personality disorder. Or could also be spiritual – we may have a spirit of selfishness or greed or doubt or grief that brings us to the point of certainty that God doesn't care and God does not even exist and that our lives are essentially futile. Into this bentness, comes Jesus with his heart of compassion and his hands of healing and Jesus announces freedom.

This past week, we learned of the death of a beloved everyday theologian, Frederick Buechner. He put plain words to the gospel and told simple stories of grace. I have a book of daily meditations taken from some 27 of his published works. This one is called, “Cripples All of Us” and comes from his novel, “Brendan,” which is the story of a convert of St. Patrick who travels about Ireland in the 500's. Hear this account about “bentness” from the perspective of Finn, one of St. Brendan's traveling companions:

Pushing down hard with his fists on the table-top he heaved himself up to where he was standing. For the first time we saw he wanted one leg. It was gone from the knee joint down. He was hopping sideways to reach for his stick in the corner when he lost his balance. He would have fallen in a heap if Brendan hadn't leapt forward and caught him.

“I'm as crippled as the dark world,” said the man whose name was Gildas.

“If it comes to that, which one of us isn’t, my dear?” Brendan said.

Gildas with but one leg. Brendan sure he’d misspent his whole life entirely. Me that had left my wife to follow him and had buried our only boy. The truth of what Brendan said stopped all our mouths. We was cripples all of us. For a moment or two there was no sound but the bees.

“To lend each other a hand when we’re falling,” Brendan said. “Perhaps that’s the only work that matters in the end.”

Bentness straightened by compassion. There is no shortage of examples of bentness in our world today, now is there. And, of course this is not unique to our time. The reading from the prophet Isaiah speaks to a similar time in the history of God’s people. After sixty years in exile in Babylon, the Israelites returned home through the gracious hand of the Persian King Cyrus. They went back to Jerusalem that had been decimated and left desolate when Judah was conquered by the Babylonians. There was great hope upon their return – oh the years they had been away, the children who heard the stories of the homeland but had never seen it, the beauty of their homeland, and oh the Temple – the center of their life together.

But the dreams were short-lived. The wealthy elite enslaved those who were poor. There was a deep-seated suspicion of foreigners and the inevitable cultural change that would come as the exiles returned. The priestly elite embezzled from the Temple tithes. The political leaders stole from the funds that King Cyrus had given them to rebuild.

There was a push to identify only the “true Jews” who returned and the spurning of the “foreigners” who had lived in Israel for the decades of the exile. There were those who were “in” and those who were not. The old corrupt hierarchical order and faithlessness that preceded the exile returned. And the prophet was called upon to speak the word of the Lord – for that is what a prophet does – to this disordered and myopic and bent people.

This is how The Message Bible puts it:

If you get rid of unfair practices,
quit blaming victims,
quit gossiping about other people’s sins,
If you are generous with the hungry
and start giving yourselves to the down-and-out,
Your lives will begin to glow in the darkness,
your shadowed lives will be bathed in sunlight.
I will always show you where to go.
I’ll give you a full life in the emptiest of places—
firm muscles, strong bones.
You’ll be like a well-watered garden,
a gurgling spring that never runs dry.
You’ll use the old rubble of past lives to build anew,
rebuild the foundations from out of your past.
You’ll be known as those who can fix anything,

restore old ruins, rebuild and renovate,
make the community lively again.

Into the distortion of their life together as God's people, into their bentness, comes the correcting and grace-filled words of the prophet.

Be fair. Stop the evil and unkind speech. Be generous with those who are hungry. Care for those who are afflicted. And into this, gloom will be lifted and peace shall come. Shalom. Wholeness and fullness. Strong bones, well-watered gardens, gurgling springs, new buildings from the past rubble. A lively and life-giving community again.

Brother Martin Luther described sin as that which causes us to be turned in on ourselves. And in this we are bent, aren't we. But that bentness is not what God desires for us. And because of this Jesus reached out to the woman – she didn't call to him, he called to her – and in gracious life-giving compassion he told her that she was free, no longer bent. Straight and able and full of praise because of the touch of the Savior's hand.

As we consider the bentness around us, I want to tell you about someone who also spoke as a prophet. In 1934, there was a Baptist pastor named Michael King who was sent by his congregation in Georgia on a whirlwind trip abroad to further the church's work. He went to Rome and Jerusalem and Tunisia and Bethlehem and then set sail for Berlin to attend a Baptist World Alliance conference. Before the conference started, he had occasion to travel to the Castle Church in Wittenberg where 400 years earlier Dr. Martin Luther had posted the 95 theses that challenged the power of the Church at that time. This young traveling pastor witnessed the rise of the Nazi Regime and the Baptist World Alliance spoke out against the racial animosity and oppression of the time. So moved was he by what he saw that upon his return home he changed his name and that of his son, striking out "Michael" on their birth certificates he replaced it with "Martin Luther."

Of course, we know his son as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One who, like the prophet in days of old, knew the grace of God in Jesus that would straighten the bentness of the world and one who would call us to do likewise so that we might live in freedom and peace, in Shalom.

Thanks be to God.