

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 21, 2016

“Jesus Saw Her”

Luke 13:10-17

What’s it like to live without hope? What’s it like to finally decide that your dreams are beyond your abilities and to resign yourself to living without any prospect that things will get better? Do you know complete hopelessness?

The closest thing I could find to a picture of a person totally without hope comes from a book by Dr. David Jeremiah titled *The Power of Encouragement*. Dr. Jeremiah tells about an old Alfred Hitchcock show which featured the story of an evil woman jailed for committing a murder. The woman soon realizes that her only chance for escape is to befriend the old man who serves as the prison undertaker. He is the only inmate who is allowed outside the prison walls. After much bribing and begging, the woman finally convinces the old man to help her escape.

He tells her that the next time she hears the bell toll to announce a death in the prison, she should slip down to the prison mortuary and hide in the coffin with the dead body. He would take the coffin out the next morning and bury it in a shallow grave. When no one was looking, he would slip back out and dig up the woman and release her. The perfect escape.

Everything went as planned. On the night the woman heard the death bell, she slipped down to the mortuary and hid in the waiting coffin with the dead body. The coffin was transported outside the prison walls and buried. The woman waited hopefully, anxiously, but no one came to dig her up. Finally, she decided to light a match and look around her.

It was then that she discovered that the dead body lying beneath her was that of the old undertaker.

There is a picture of hopelessness. My admonition to you this day is that unless you are in a situation that is as hopeless as that woman’s, it is time to begin looking at the positive side of life. It is time to look to Jesus. Jesus is a hope giver. Jesus is a dream restorer. Jesus takes people who are hanging on with clinched teeth and gives them a new, fresh beginning.

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues one Sabbath day and a woman was there who had been crippled for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up. The New International Version of the Bible says she was crippled “by a spirit.” That’s an interesting phrase. I’ve known lots of people who have been crippled by a spirit. Some of these people, too, are bent and cannot straighten up.

I’ve seen people bent over with a sense of responsibility. Not that their responsibilities are greater than anyone else’s. What weighs them down is a sense of inadequacy to meet those responsibilities. The sad thing is that they are not inadequate. But somehow along the way they have been made to feel that way, and they go around with the weight of the world on their shoulders. And you can see it in the way they walk—and the way they talk.

“How are you doing?” “Oh, I’m surviving.”

There are many healthy, intelligent, well-educated people who go through life feeling like losers. They’ve got it all compared to most of the people in the world, but they sabotage themselves time and time again because their attitude is so bad. When you feel down on yourself, when you feel that there is no hope left, it causes you to act in irrational ways.

When we have a spirit of inadequacy, when we have a senseless feeling of hopelessness and despair, we do dumb things. We sabotage ourselves at work, we sabotage ourselves in our relationships with others and we sabotage the happiness that is our God-given right.

This woman had been crippled for eighteen years “by a spirit.” Then Jesus saw her. What an exhilarating thought. Jesus saw her. Here is the answer to our feelings of helplessness and despair. Jesus knows our situation.

Many people are bent over. Not physically, perhaps. But emotionally and spiritually. Some are bent over with a spirit of inadequacy and defeat. Others are bent over because they have experienced genuine trauma in their lives.

One morning Janice Anthony and her husband were on their way to work when they unexpectedly came upon a cow in the road. Janice swerved to miss the cow and ended up crashing into a telephone pole. Both she and her husband were injured. The next day, Janice returned to work at the day care center, but she was self-conscious of the bruises on her face. She worried that her appearance would upset the children. The first child at the day-care center that day was a bubbly four-year-old named Elizabeth. Elizabeth ran to give Janice a hug, but stopped short when she saw Janice’s face. Then, Elizabeth announced with wonder, “Ms. Jan, you have a rainbow on your face!” Where Janice had seen the ugliness of bruises, little Elizabeth had seen the beauty of a rainbow.

Some of us have a rainbow of hurt in our hearts. We live in fear of the future. Our health is uncertain. Our jobs are endangered. We are coping with family matters that are weighing us down more than people around us can possibly imagine. But here’s the good news: Jesus knows! We have a friend who cares about

our situation. Even more important, Jesus has the power to lift burdens from our back. Jesus can set us free.

He knows our needs. Luke tells us that when Jesus saw this poor woman, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman you are set free from your infirmity." Then he puts his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. Jesus can give us what we need to cope with our difficult situations.

Will Willmon tells of a small College Chapel in North Carolina that has one of the most unusual baptismal fonts in the world. It is made from a huge stone which has been hollowed out for a font. On that very stone, African slaves stood to be sold to the highest bidder. Today, the stone serves Belmont Abbey as its baptismal font. An inscription on the plaque tells all who enter those cleansing waters: "On this stone, men were sold into slavery. From this stone, men are now baptized into freedom." By the power of Jesus Christ, you and I can move from slavery to freedom, from despair to victory. He can lift our burdens and straighten our backs.

But there is one thing more we need to see. Jesus calls us to lift one another's burdens. It is easy to see ourselves in this story as the woman whose back was straightened by Jesus. What we need to see, though, is that, as Christ's body to the world, we are to be lifting the burdens of other people in the world. Not only does Jesus see us and lift our burdens, we are also in the business to unbend the backs of others. On the cross, Christ has unbend millions of backs—including that of the woman in our Scripture for the day. We need to consecrate our lives to straightening the backs of others. Through words of encouragement and acts of compassion may we, like our Master, be those who unbend the backs of others. Amen.