

## Standing and Bending

*Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 22 August 2016. Jeremiah 1:4-10, Psalm 71:1-6, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17.*

There have been many inspiring moments at the Rio Olympics. The Refugee Team, who did not win any medals but inspired just by being there. Simone Manuel – the first African American woman to win a swimming medal. And she won four! Wayde Van Niekerk from South Africa. His mother was a world class athlete who was not allowed to compete during the years of Apartheid. Her son Wayde broke Michael Johnson's world record and won gold in the 400m.

One of the best came during the women's 5000 meter second heat. New Zealand's Nikki Hamblin and US runner Abbey D'Agostino collided near the 3200 meter mark. Hamblin clipped the heels of the runner in front of her and stumbled. D'Agostino ran into her. They both hit the ground hard. Hamblin was initially dazed by the fall. Rather than run ahead, D'Agostino stopped to help her. "Get up," she said, "We have to finish this." They started running, but it soon became clear D'Agostino had been badly injured. Hamblin stayed back to run with D'Agostino but D'Agostino waved her on. Hamblin went on to finish in 15<sup>th</sup> place. D'Agostino hobbled across the line in last place. She left the track in a wheelchair.

After the race, Hamblin said, "Regardless of the race and the result on the board, that's a moment that you're never, ever going to forget for the rest of your life, that girl shaking my shoulder like, 'Come on, get up.'"

You can almost hear Jesus saying the same thing to this bent over woman. "Come on, get up. Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

The lesson called it a spirit, the thing that bent and crippled her. Jesus named it Satan. Maybe the writer had in mind a physical issue like scoliosis or osteoporosis or severe arthritis. But there are other possibilities. Many spirits bend and cripple us. Spirits of inferiority, addiction, injustice, shame, hopelessness. These and other evil spirits bend us over and make us quite unable to stand up straight.

The prophet Jeremiah seems to have been afflicted by one of these spirits – the spirit of only, the spirit of fear. The Lord came to him and called him to be a prophet. And all he could say was, "I am only a boy."

Because of this spirit, whatever it was, the woman was physically bent over, unable to stand. Imagine her looking at the ground, never able to look anyone in the eye, suffering pain with every movement. She was isolated. She was shorter than everyone else, easy to miss. No one

would not notice her in the crowds at the synagogue. But Jesus saw her. He called her to him – she did not ask for a thing. He touched her. Come on. Get up. You are set free.

Likewise, the Lord touched the mouth of Jeremiah. “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” Come on, Jeremiah. Get up. I have put my words in your mouth. The Spirit of the Lord helps us stand.

But there was another person at the synagogue that day who, like the woman, was also stuck in one position, unable to move. Most people would not have noticed. On the outside he looked like everyone else. But Jesus saw him. The woman was stuck bent, unable to straighten. The leader of the synagogue was stuck straight, unable to bend.

The synagogue leader was a good man. He was a respected member of the community. He organized the prayers. He studied the scriptures. He obeyed the law.

And he revered the Sabbath. This was not a pious, holier-than-thou kind of response on his part. There were good reasons for his actions. The Sabbath was supposed to be a day of rest for all people. It was the day of new creation. In the beginning, when God formed Adam out of the dust of the earth, Adam and Eve did not have to work. Work came after the fall. When God’s people ended up as slaves in Egypt, work was used to punish and oppress them. They were forced to work all the time. God’s dream and hope for them, and for us, was to get us back to Eden, back to God’s vision of abundance and care for all. So God set them free from slavery. And after the Exodus, God gave them the Sabbath as a day of rest and freedom. Sabbath was like a return to Eden in the world of work. Observing the Sabbath was a way to celebrate God’s gift of freedom and abundance for all.

But despite his reverence for the Sabbath, this man was not free. Rather than relax into freedom, he had to maintain control. His zeal and devotion became a straitjacket. Instead of seeing the Sabbath as a gift from God to free the world, he saw it as a rule to be enforced. Rather than accept the healing of Jesus as a fitting Sabbath gift, he tried to stir up the crowd against Jesus and the freedom he offered. He was just as bound as the women he did not want Jesus to heal. She needed to stand up straight. He needed to bend

Jesus had a name for the spirit that bound this man - hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is holding on to mercy for ourselves and refusing to give it to others. But there are other spirits that can bind us straight and make us unable to bend. A spirit of legalism, or pride, or prejudice, or resentment, or anxiety, or control.

So notice that Jesus saw them both. He saw the bent over woman. He saw the stuck straight man. He touched the bent over woman and helped her stand by reminding her of her dignity – she was a daughter of Abraham. In the same way, he touched those rigid, hypocritical hearts and tried to help them bend by reminding them of their compassion.

He told them that they already knew what to do. They knew how to take care of their animals, even on the Sabbath. They knew how to untie a beloved ox or donkey and lead it to water, even on the Sabbath. This daughter of Abraham was just as valuable as a donkey. Jesus called to mind ways their rigid hearts already knew how to bend in love for something else.

Desmond Tutu often said, “God wants to set the oppressed free from being oppressed and the oppressors free from oppressing.” Jesus did both that day. He helped a bent over woman stand. And he helped a rigid heart bend.

And he continues to do both. The healing of Jesus calls us to stand up, speak up for ourselves or for others, look the world in the eye. And the healing of Jesus calls us to bend down and listen with compassion and see things from another point of view. Both kinds of healing are at work in our lives.

We call it dying and rising with Christ. We symbolize it in baptism. In dying with Christ, we bend to the needs of others. We listen with vulnerability and humility. In rising with Christ, we stand up and be the people God has made us to be. It’s like God said to Jeremiah, “I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” We are continually dying and rising, being pulled down and being plucked up, bending and standing.

After the incident on the track, Abbey D’Agostino was lauded as an example of the Olympic Spirit. But she explained it as her Christian spirit. She said, “Although my actions were instinctual at that moment, the only way I can and have rationalized it is that God prepared my heart to respond that way. This whole time here he’s made clear to me that my experience in Rio was going to be about more than my race performance—and as soon as Nikki got up I knew that was it.”

As we run our race, we are called to stand up for ourselves and for others. And we are called to bend to the needs of the world. Bending without standing denies the image of God in us. Standing without bending denies the image of God in others.

As we confess our sins this morning, I invite you to reflect on ways you need to stand up and on ways you need to bend. May Jesus heal us all in both ways. Amen.

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