**14 Pentecost**

**August 21, 2016**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,**

**The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,**

**And the power of God known in the Spirit.**

**Amen.**

As most of you know Caren and I were in England for the past couple of weeks. It was an absolutely wonderful trip … our first real vacation in over two years. We spent a few days in London, visited Canterbury, and then traveled to Dover and along the southern coast to Falmouth in Cornwall, and then back to London. Before flying home we had the honor of being invited to tea with Karen Armstrong, the originator of the Charter for Compassion.

I’m not going to give you a travelogue this morning, but a few years ago there was a book … a Pulitzer Prize finalist … and an Academy Award nominated film name the “Accidental Tourist.” Well, on this trip I felt like an accidental pilgrim … and not for the reasons you might assume. But you’ll hear more about at another time.

This morning we heard a story that is found only in Luke’s Gospel … the story of a woman who is “crippled” by a “spirit” and is “bent over.” The author of Luke’s Gospel tells the story almost as if it were a play. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He sees a woman who is “bent over” by a “spirit.” He calls her over to him and tells her she is free of her malady, lays hands on her, and she stands up straight praising God. However, Jesus does this on the Sabbath, so there is an exchange between the synagogue leader and Jesus about the propriety of this woman being healed on the day of rest.

For some this is another story about the divinity of Jesus being affirmed by his power to bring healing to this woman, and his struggle with the established religious practices of his day. This story may, indeed, be just that but for me there is something much more significant … and I believe is all too often overlooked. For me it is not so much about whether this event actually happened as it is recorded … rather, how do we know this story to be true in our world today?

Let me unpack the story a little bit. Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath and sees this bent over woman. He calls her to him. Right there he has breached a liturgical norm. Synagogue worship then, as it is today in the Orthodox Jewish tradition, is segregated by gender … the men worship in one space but are separated from the women who worship in an adjacent space. So, for Jesus to call this woman to him is a breaking of the norm of the prevailing religious practices, and he is also inviting the bent over woman to break the norm as well.

According to the text this woman is “crippled” by a “spirit” and it has caused her to be “bent over.” Imagine what it is like to be bent over. The text tells us this has been going on for 18 years and considering the average lifespan of people in the first century that could mean that she has been bent over for one third to one half of her entire life … certainly a good portion of her adulthood.

So, what do you see when you are bent over? Well, not much. Other people’s feet rather than their faces. The ground in front of you rather than the horizon. If you are bent over you can’t see sunrises or sunsets unless you are lying down. You see shadows instead of sunshine … muddy paths rather than rainbows. If you are bent over you can’t see the faces of other people … their smiles, their frowns, their tears, their scorn. You can’t look at them eye to eye and wink at them or have them wink at you. If you are bent over your world view is very limited.

And what might have caused this woman to be “bent over?” The text only tells us that it is a “spirit” that has “crippled” her. Perhaps it is a medical ailment … scoliosis … a curvature of the spine … or osteoporosis … or maybe a trauma to her back. However, I believe the word “spirit” holds some clues to how we might know this story to be true in our world today.

There are people all around us in the world today who are “bent over” by a “spirit.” Maybe it is a general fear that has pervaded our physical and social environment … the economy … the threat of terrorism … the warnings about climate change. I’m sure there are lots of “bent over” people from the flooding in Louisiana and the wildfires in California. Maybe the crippling spirit is a family issue … kids, or parents, or siblings, or trouble in a relationship, domestic violence, or the threat of a divorce. Maybe the spirit is actually a medical one with its financial and personal costs laying a burden on people’s shoulders, pulling their back forward and down under the pressure. Look around you amongst your family and friends, the people you encounter at work, or the library, or the supermarket, or just see walking down the streets. Who are they that are bent over? And what crippling spirit in the world or in them is bending them over? And how might you see yourself as being bent over? And what spirit is causing you to lose sight of the horizon and see only the ground in front of you? Personally, I know something about being bent over … after my son’s accident that left him disabled … and just last spring when I was bent over by pain before my back surgery relieved the pressure on my sciatic nerve.

In a former congregation, St. John’s in Northampton, Massachusetts, there is a young family, Andy, Marcy and their two daughters. Andy is a sportscaster for ESPN and Marcy was an elementary school teacher. Marcy was an energetic woman in her thirties who jogged at the local park, ate right, and was in great health … until the day an aneurism in her brain burst while she was teaching her third grade class at school. Rushed to the hospital she had immediate surgery to remove part of her skull to relieve the pressure, and her life hung at the edge of death for almost a month. I had hurried to the hospital and stayed with the family until late that evening, and I visited with Andy and their daughters and family and friends a lot during that month … and for a long time afterwards. I watched as Andy … a six foot one inch healthy young man … began to bend over. His shoulders slumped, and his head hung, and his body seemed to bend more and more. He looked downward most of the time avoiding eye contact with me and others as the reality of the situation came upon him, and as depression yanked at his soul and bent him over.

Jesus’ message is that the Kingdom of God is right here … right now. It is what he taught in both word and action. The Kingdom of God for Jesus was the world as it should be when we live into the image of God in which we are made. Jesus refers to this bent over woman as a “daughter of Abraham.” This is the only place in our Holy Scriptures where this term is used yet it is quite common to find the expression “sons of Abraham. Can you imagine what it must have been like to be this person who couldn’t see another’s face and then to be recognized as a legitimate heir to her faith? Jesus is saying to her “You are a blessed child of God. God wants you to go through life standing up straight, looking at the other in the eye, seeing the beauty of the creation in the clouds and stars and tops of trees, and having a vision to the horizon … and beyond.”

This may be a story about Jesus’ power to bring healing. I think it is much more than that. We are burdened with many spirits in this world today, and they can bend us over. But God wants us to stand up straight as beloved children of God. God wants us to look out to the horizon and beyond and have a vision for this world and our place in it. God wants us to see the faces of others and have them see our face as well.

I end with an epilogue about Andy and Marcy. Andy and Marcy’s two girls are now young women in college. Marcy is paralyzed on her left side and she walks with a cane, but she is feisty as ever … and she is standing up straight with a vision for a wonderful future for herself and her family. And Andy is also standing up straight, looking Marcy in the eye, and looking out at the horizon for a shared future with his beloved wife and daughters. In a recent posting on Facebook Marcy and her family were leaving for a trip to Yellowstone, and Grand Canyon, and Yosemite, and the Big Sur coast of California … places where the horizon is vast.

What Jesus told the bent over woman was that God wants her to stand up straight and live the life of a beloved child of God made in God’s image. That is what this story is telling each one of us today. We are all beloved children of God … made in the image of the divine. God does not want us bent over … by physical maladies or by the pressure of the world around us. God wants us to stand up straight … to be able to see the horizon and to look to the future with joyful anticipation.

Amen.