

Crippling Spirits

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August 21, 2016
Luke 13: 10-17

After two weeks spent glued to the television for parts of each day watching the Olympic athletes and witnessing the amazing flexibility, strength, and endurance of these young bodies competing for medals, we might conclude that having that kind of body and competitive edge is precisely what God intends for all human beings. But we would be wrong, of course. Rather, God cares about us having the right spirit in order to be the person God calls us to be. So I believe we must think about the woman in Luke 13: 10-17 metaphorically. In other words, let's consider what we have in common with this woman possessed by a spirit which had crippled her for eighteen years. How might her story be my story and your story?

Her perspective was the floor. She couldn't see ahead, only down. Her future must have felt very constricted. It was said of her that she had a crippling spirit. Something had happened eighteen years ago to produce this effect, but we learn nothing about that. What kind of spirit keeps a person bent over and burdened, vision restricted to the floor below? I will resist the temptation to give her a physical diagnosis because I don't believe that her physical disability is the point. Looking deeper, we note that the text speaks of a "spirit" which had crippled her, not a spinal deformity. Such a spirit would focus on dark thoughts, self-centered intentions, anxiety and worry. There would be no sense of hopefulness. Life would be experienced as bondage. We can all feel that way sometimes, and it can even become a way of life. Think about how you may have experienced this in your own life.

A crippling spirit can take many forms. It could be a pervasive sense of inadequacy. It could be a fear of failure. It could be drug or alcohol dependence. It could be any life event—an illness, condition or disability—that determines for the person affected that he or she can no longer live life as a person essential for God's purposes. Such crippling spirits produce disability, but they are not more prevalent among those with a physical disability like the woman in the story we read. I am thinking about an American Baptist preacher, Rev. Mel Schoonover, now deceased, who was born with osteogenesis imperfecta, also known as brittle bone disease. This is a disabling genetic condition that leaves the fragile, weight-bearing bones very deformed because of frequent fractures. He was soon confined to a wheelchair for mobility, but this did not keep him from completing college and seminary and having an active life as a preacher, social activist, husband, and father. On a trip Mel took to Puerto Rico, that included a visit to some catacombs, it was suggested he stay above ground, since the access was down a steep flight of stone stairs. He would have none of that. Mel pulled himself out of his wheelchair and used his arms to crawl down to the catacombs and then pull himself back up. From his example, I think we can agree that it is not physical limitations that cripple us; it is the spirit within us that either constricts our vision of our future or keeps us hopeful about God's purpose for our lives.

Returning to the Luke account, we saw that the bent-over woman was in the synagogue, and I suspect she was a regular attender. She probably felt comfortable with the synagogue leader. He emphasized the importance of rules and had a narrow view of Jewish law. I imagine she felt excluded from the ranks

of the righteous, but she knew where she stood, and she accepted her constricted reality. Her view of the floor matched her expectation of God's use for her in this life. She may have been aware of Jesus' presence that day in the synagogue, but with no expectation that her life held any promise for usefulness to God, she took no notice of him. But Jesus called her over and said, "Woman you are set free from your ailment." "Ailment" can be translated from the Greek as a lack of strength or an inability to produce results. How telling that is! She was a woman without expectations for any purpose, now given a sense of purpose. But it only happened, if you recall, when Jesus "laid his hands on her." She couldn't simply believe what he said; indeed, he didn't ask about her faith. Removing this crippling spirit required contact with God's grace. Consider what it means to know when we have been touched by God's grace.

As I was preparing this sermon, I began to think about a time I felt burdened by a crippling spirit. It was my intern year in pediatrics at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. I was working 90-100-hour weeks. I felt very inadequate in my knowledge of pediatrics and very worried that an error on my part could result in the death of one of my young patients. I had a wife and a delightful daughter who was 18 months old when I started my intern year. I remember almost nothing of that year in Alison's life. I felt really down, and the fact that I was an ordained Presbyterian minister did nothing to ease my burden. I could hardly think about Jesus Christ because my mind was completely preoccupied with my anxiety and sadness about the situation I was in. It was attendance at church and a Bible study that kept me anchored and helped me persist. Like the bent-over woman I persisted at a religious life and experienced grace by contact with Christ in people both within and outside the church. One of those persons through whom I experienced God's grace back in those pediatric training years now finds herself bent over by a condition of muscular weakness that has required frequent use of a wheelchair. In a recent letter to Sarah and me, she made this comment, speaking of God: "His purposes may be very different from my preferences, but He will be glorified, in me and through me..." Remember that the woman in our story began praising God after she was touched by Jesus and stood up straight. With or without deformity, she now experienced the power of God in her life to give her life purpose even when she had given up on that possibility.

Even as we consider what we each have in common with the bent-over woman, we cannot leave this story from Luke without also considering what we might have in common with the synagogue leader. You will recall that Jesus speaks one sentence to the woman, namely, "you are released from your ailment"; he speaks three sentences to the synagogue leader and all who share his perspective on religious observance, beginning: "You hypocrites!" All this leader and his fellow religious people wanted was to keep the Sabbath holy, meaning, "No work." I'm sure he realized that Jewish law allows a person to save a life on the Sabbath. Clearly, he didn't see the removal of a crippling spirit from someone who had harbored it for 18 years life-saving or requiring immediate attention. He sees in Jesus' healing action a violation of law and tradition. As a result, he can't see the healing for what it is and feels anger, rather than joy, as his response. Jesus, for his part, doesn't try to make an argument based on the legitimacy of healing on the Sabbath. Rather, he argues that setting a person free from bondage should not be delayed. Jesus offered this woman new life—a wonderful gift on any day of the week.

I also need to be careful not to be a narrow-minded religious leader. Over my years in ministry I have found myself more and more willing to give people latitude in putting together a wedding service or funeral service. I used to be more rigid and must still guard against being too insistent on certain

elements being there in keeping with our beloved Reformed tradition. Seven years ago I participated in my first blessing of the union of a gay couple (We called it the “non-wedding wedding” since the PCUSA had not yet accepted the validity of gay marriage). The Lord’s Supper was celebrated, and I presided over the table. There was a time when I would have found it difficult to rejoice in such an occasion. Fortunately, I had grown, by grace, to be able to see Christ present in that service. Celebrating the Lord’s Supper felt so right, and there was palpable joy in that place. However, one of the two men was saddened that his parents stayed away. There was no acceptance of the marriage by this man’s family until a year ago. Then one day, he received an e-mail from his parents stating that they were coming to visit. Acceptance replaced rejection; condemnation was replaced with joy for this family. Another crippling spirit was removed.

Jesus wants us to know that feeling joy when others are released from oppressive bonds is the appropriate response of a disciple. The synagogue leader was not a bad person, but he was more concerned about following tradition than rejoicing in someone’s liberation from a crippling spirit. We will all have periods when we need to recognize Christ with us and claim release from crippling spirits. We will all have opportunities to see others being released from crippling burdens. The proper response in either case is joy. Our challenge is not to allow negative or habitual thinking to blind us to the presence of Jesus Christ reaching out in grace to set us free. This is true repentance: to confess our negative thinking and allow ourselves to be transformed into joyful and hopeful children of God. Then we might truly become a liberating presence for others as agents of God’s grace. So my challenge to us this morning is to recognize in ourselves any crippling spirit from which release is needed. May we then experience God’s liberating grace, wherever we experience it, with joy! Amen.