

## **Straighten Up!**

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### **Isaiah 58:9b-14**

58:9b If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

58:10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.

58:11 The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

58:12 Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

58:13 If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs;

58:14 then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

### **Luke 13:10-17**

13:10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

13:11 And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

13:12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

13:13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

13:14 But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

13:15 But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?"

13:16 And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

13:17 When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

### **Proclamation of the Word**

At the point in the worship when we have confessed our sins together, we repent and start fresh asking God to help us lead lives worthy of our calling as Christians. In other words, we are trying to change, to do better, and asking God's help to do so. I heard a friend leading worship give the Assurance of God's Pardon and she said, "God loves us just as we are, but God loves us enough to not leave us that way." Today's passages are reminders that God expects more of us. It points a finger at us and makes us look at ourselves honestly.

Isaiah passage says, "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil".... The prophet is telling us that we have interpersonal shortcomings. A yoke- a tool used to harness animals and control them to get something out of them. We have done that to each other. We have used people to get what we want or what we need. We have spoken evil. We have pointed fingers at others without regard to our responsibility or our shortcomings. The passage is a reminder to not be too sanctimonious or self-righteous, but to practice humility. Isaiah 58 goes on to remind us of social righteousness, caring for our neighbors in the community and being a compassionate people of faith.

*58:10 if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*

No need to be discouraged. Straighten up! You shall live in security and peace when you treat each other and your neighbors rightly. A natural consequence of living in right relationships with others, is this sense of strength, well-being, and peace. It is a message which needs to be shouted out! It is a message which according to the first verse of chapter 58 reads, "sound the trumpet." In other words, listen up! Straighten up!

Today's Gospel lesson is also about straightening up.

Rabbi Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath- the day dedicated to rest and the Lord.

The men in the community would have gathered to hear the holy Scripture read- they had no printed bibles nor an app for their iphone with Scripture.

They gathered together to hear God's word.

As a worship leader, I know how that synagogue leader must have felt.

We spend hours preparing to lead worship. Choirs rehearse. Prayers are written. Hymns are chosen. All the players are briefed on their parts. And as Gail Williams and Raenota Merrill, who have been volunteering as our Administrative Assistant know, the bulletin takes hours and hours to

produce. Hopefully, each one of us personally prepares for worship expecting to hear God, to feel the Spirit's presence, and to be in right relationship with your brother or sister in Christ.

I am sure the leader, the presider, of the synagogue wanted to make sure that everything went well this Sabbath service. The leader of the synagogue was likely elected as president of that community. Priests served at the Temple, but locally the leaders came from among the people, chosen to serve. Jesus was there likely reading and interpreting scripture, when all of a sudden he stopped.

She was hard not to notice.

She was bent over crooked almost folded in two.

She had a painful spinal deformity which she had lived with for 18 years. More than likely, she was going to the section where women were allowed to listen in on the visiting rabbi.

She was there to practice Sabbath keeping as the law required.

And most likely this was the congregation whose regular offerings had helped sustain her life. The tithe of money or 1/10 of what persons made helped to sustain the vulnerable, the widow, the orphan, and even this disabled woman.

She could not look people straight in the eye because of her ailment without her neck aching. She likely held her head low looking at the ground.

She may be wondering about people staring at her wondering privately what sin she had committed to deserve this deformity for that is what was believed in ancient days.

No, they did not point their fingers or speak evil because they were in church, but they sure did think it!

She held her head down listening intently to Jesus.

And Jesus saw her. Really saw her in all her pain and social anguish.

And his eyes full of grace and compassion rested on her.

The President's eyebrows rose. This is not going as planned, he thought. Then his blood pressure rose as Jesus walked over to her and laid his hands on her.

"Out of order, Jesus," the president said.

Then she straightened up and could not help but shout, "Praise God" with tears of joy running down her face.

She did not come seeking healing.

She simply was observing the Sabbath, honoring God, offering prayers.

She did not expect for her life to get straightened out!

She did not even ask for this.

As she praised God others gasped and rejoiced.

But the president was unnerved. He was angry, not rejoicing in the work of mercy that Jesus had performed.

His duty weighed on him. This is a sacred day and this is most unusual- working on the Sabbath. Keep the Sabbath holy was not a suggestion.

It is in God's top ten- the Ten Commandments.

How to keep it holy was the hot topic of Jesus' day.

Lighting a match was work, so a fire could not be lit.

All cooking was to be done before Friday at sundown.

Over the years things like clapping one's hands, jumping up and down and visiting the sick have been forbidden on the Sabbath.

The president thought Jesus had certainly crossed that line and was out order.

Jesus had offended one of God's laws to heal this woman.

Leaders should be held to a higher standard.

The president needed to do something to exhibit that this is not an "anything goes" religion. So he admonishes Jesus and the congregation.

"There are six days in which we can work," he declared. "If you wish to seek healing do it on one of those other days."

The crowd begins to whisper to each other.

This week a couple of your elders and the pastors of Fort Hill attended a Presbytery meeting which we do several times a year.

We attend to the work we share with all the other churches in our area.

Our financial support of Presbytery helps us collectively do Campus Ministry at Furman, Wofford as well as Clemson.

We support the work of the Buc Outdoor Center, care for congregations in need of support, do mission projects together, among other things.

But one of the most important things we do together is support candidates for ministry, help them through the process of seminary education, and guide them in their learning.

This past Tuesday a candidate for ordination as Minister of Word and Sacrament came before the assembly for examination.

Lindsay Hatch has been called by our neighbors in Sandy Springs at the Mt. Zion Presbyterian Church to be their pastor.

She has just graduated from Austin Presbyterian Seminary in Texas.

She preached a faithful and inspiring sermon.

She shared her faith story of coming to faith, of going through two painful divorces while living with her father,

...of being invited to church as a young person,

...of discovering God's healing mercy and strength in her life.

...hearing Jesus speak to her and praying for God to come into her life and take over.

...Of refining her theology at a Presbyterian among the Baptist at Baylor University.

...Telling us all very frankly how God in Jesus Christ has made her wounded life whole again.

When the members of presbytery were able to ask questions, one pastor, stood up and asked her to clarify her written statement of faith and to defend her orthodox belief in salvation through Jesus Christ.

When she ably did so, he was not satisfied.

He suggested she was not clear meaning to me that she did not say the exact phrasing to meet his approval, his test.

He was looking for some letter of the law, a particular phrasing.

It felt like he was bullying her.

The members of Presbytery made knowing looks at one another.

It was all I could do to stay seated.

And then this scripture from Isaiah 58 ran through my mind,

“If you remove the yoke, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,...your light will shine in the darkness.”

The man seemed to me like the President of the Synagogue furious that

Jesus was healing on the Sabbath.

As he badgered this yet-to-be ordained pastor whose is dedicating her life to God,

I could here the president, yelling in the synagogue on that Sabbath, “Order, order.”

He felt it was his job to straighten things out.

That’s when Jesus turns to them, “You frauds, you hypocrites! Don’t you untie your animals on the Sabbath and lead them to water so that they make be free to live? So then why is it not right that this daughter of Abraham, God’s own child, be set free from that which has bound and enslaved her for 18 years?”

The critics are put to shame by Jesus.

They looked silly and red-faced. They were more concerned about being in charge and being right, than to be able to offer compassion for the woman.

But, Jesus straightened them out.

But what about the woman who had been bent over with arthritis for 18 years? Who was set free from Satan’s grasp?

She was standing upright, praising God with tears of joy- giving all the glory to

God. And the congregation delighted with her and cheered for Jesus.

What in your life prevents you from joining in on the celebration?

From rejoicing with others and giving God glory?

How dare any of us to be so self-righteous that all God’s children may not know that kind of freedom and the joy of God’s amazing grace and tender justice!

Indeed, we all need Jesus who is revealed to us in Scripture, to point out our blind spots, to correct us. So let us point the finger first at ourselves and pray this prayer (as written by Mary Todd)...

“When I find myself growing impatient and itching to be unkind to somebody, Lord, straighten me out.

When I find myself enjoying blaming the victim, Lord, straighten me out.

When I find myself growing arrogant, Lord, straighten me out.

When jealousy and pride come creeping in, Lord, straighten me out.

When I find myself keeping a record of someone else's wrongs, and rejoicing in someone else's mistakes, Lord, straighten me out.

When I start thinking I can see more clearly than others can, Lord, straighten me out.

When I think I already know it all, Lord, straighten me out.

When my need to be in control is more important than the person that is before me, Lord, straighten me out.

When I think I've arrived, that I'm perfected in love, Lord, have mercy.

Lord, straighten me out. Straighten us all out. Set us free." 1

1 Todd, Straightened Out, [www.lectionaryhomiletics.com](http://www.lectionaryhomiletics.com), August 2010.