

Last Sunday, I heard Bishop John Shelby Spong delivered a lecture. It was a video that was one of a series on the gospel of Matthew. I know that Bishop Spong once served here as rector. I also know that among theologians, people find Bishop Spong's theories to be controversial. I always thought that perhaps his provocative and controversial proclamations were indications that he was struggling with questions about God and Jesus. I understood his writing as a means of working out his own theology. Struggling with theology and digging into our questions is a good practice that can lead to enlarging our faith rather than shrinking it.

In the lecture I heard, Spong reminds the listeners that the gospels were written to a Jewish audience BY Jewish witnesses to Christ. Students of Hebrew, the language of Jewish scripture, know that the stories of the Hebrew Bible are told through images. The Hebrew Bible is our Old Testament. The images that fill the Old Testament transcend the page on which they are written. They transcend the time and the specific context in which they are situated. For example, after the creation story in the garden of Eden, Eve was told not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. That fruit was a ripe delicious apple that had that ripe delicious apple smell. She was tempted by it and ate it. After she ate it she was kicked out of the garden. Does that mean that God does not want us to eat apples? No. That story is not about apples. It is a story about understanding our relationship with God; it is about discerning God's will and controlling our human desires.

The image used in this text today is the image of a woman suffering from a distorted and bent posture. Luke might have chosen any number of images to illustrate what he intended, but the fact that he chose this type of crippling suffering means

something. This story is unique to Luke. It's not borrowed from Mark's earlier gospel. His audience was broader than Mark's or Matthew's. He was speaking to Jews who had been dispersed from Jerusalem during the Jewish people's release from previous exiles and captivity. He was speaking to the followers of Jesus who had not been steeped in the lore and imagery of the Hebrew culture. Yet, instead of lecture he resorted to images that resonated in the culture they lived in. The image he used in this text carries multiple meanings.

In this story, the person that Jesus chose to heal was a woman, and he chose to heal her *inside a synagogue*. We know from scripture and from history that women had no status in Judaism. Worshiping together with men in a synagogue would not have been common. So Jesus chose to heal a woman inside the synagogue on the holiest day of the week, the Sabbath. And did you notice that this woman did not ask to be healed? In other healing stories the ailing person asks Jesus for help. Here Jesus brings healing without being asked. Could Luke have been hoping to convey that God's vast mercy knows no bounds; that the boundaries that human beings erect are not boundaries that God recognizes; that the systems that human beings put in place are to be challenged if they are not in accordance with God's purposes? This story demonstrates that not only does God recognize women as fully human but as deserving of mercy, mercy that was denied by the system set up by those in power. What could it be about this particular disease that might have been important to Luke?

To get a handle on that let's take this story out of it's first century context into the present, into a setting that is more familiar to us. Because of the medical information available to us in the 21st century, we know that a disease like this one might be caused

by osteoporosis. But let's not get caught up in medical diagnosis. Like the apple in the Garden of Eden, it is tempting to think that's what this story is about. But I think Luke had something more in mind than Jesus bringing about a medical cure. Instead biology or medicine, let's think metaphorically. What in society might cause a person to be weighed down such that she would be bent with her face pointed toward the ground? Maybe the weight of society's demands on her have crushed her inner strength. Or, as I preached about last week, maybe she is exhausted from trying to make her voice heard when no one seems willing to listen to her point of view. Or maybe, she's gotten stuck that way from always looking down at the electronic device in her hand. I saw a political cartoon just this week that shows a group of people standing around the bed of what looks to be a patient in a hospital. Everyone has their heads bowed as if in prayer. It looks like the patient is in a terminal condition. The next panel zooms into the scene so the reader can see that everyone's head, including the patient's is bowed because they are all looking at their cell phones.

No matter what the reason is for this woman's condition, with her face always pointed to the ground she is unable to look up and see the world in all its splendor. She is unable to have full relationships because she cannot look at other people face to face. She is unable to live the full life that God gave her, and she is unable to be part of the community that God has called her to be a part of.

Now let's travel back in our minds to the first century setting. The disease that this woman has is understood as deriving from a "spirit of weakness" (Luke 13:2). People who were ill were considered defiled and not allowed to worship along with the rest of the community. They were typically shunned by everyone. Yet, this woman was

there. And when Jesus plucks her out from the crowd and heals her, a conflict is set up between Jesus and the temple authorities. The restrictions they placed on worship were increasing their own power and putting an obstacle in the way of God being in relationship with God's people. From reading the entirety of Luke's gospel it is clear that Jesus knew his call would lead him to Jerusalem. He knew that he would need to confront the temple authorities who were leading large segment of the population away from and not closer to God.

When Jesus healed the suffering woman that day, the Greek language used to describe his action points to God as being the agent of the healing. Jesus was the instrument and God was the actor. God acted through the invocation of Jesus' words. He said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Our text says, "When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." The Greek verb literally says she "was straightened up." It's as if Jesus spoke the words and God pulled the string to raise her to her full stature. The hearers of Luke's story would have heard it that way. They would have heard that Jesus did not just cure her and she was suddenly able to move her body into an upright position. They would have heard that when Jesus spoke something, maybe the Holy Spirit of God?, raised her up.

All of us here try to live our lives as God would want us to live them. But do we trust God to raise us up? Do we trust God to make us whole, to make us the whole person that he created us to be? Whether we ask for help in that process or not, God is there to provide it. Sometimes worldly demands on our lives get in the way of our being that whole person. We have work to do, we have classes to go to and grades that we have to achieve. We have social obligations, we have sports commitments. We have to keep

our cars filled with gas and food on the table. I get that. I live in that world, too. But we need to remember that it is our obligation to tend to the kingdom of God. If we who love God do not tend to God's kingdom, who will?

This congregation is filled with generous, caring, creative and skilled people. It has the potential of shining a bright light on the love of Christ in this community, of setting an example for those who have rejected the church. And often that is just what this congregation does. But the people here face the challenge of being weighed down with worldly demands. Some might even feel that demands of congregational life weigh heavily on them. But we need to trust God to give us the strength to stand up, to be fully present and engaged in order to give life to the ministries to our children and youth; to the ministries to the poor and needy; to the ministries that serve our own sick and suffering church members; to the ministry of being formed in Christ, a formation that brings stronger faith year by year.

As God told Jeremiah in our Old Testament reading this morning, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you." God knows each one of us. And God has called each one of us according to our own gifts and talents. God set Jesus to go to Jerusalem to face the authorities, a call that was not comfortable or easy. God is calling us to step out of an easy and comfortable life and make ourselves available to serve our neighbors and each other, including our own church community. Together, with God's help, we can all be made to stand up straight.