

The God Who Bends To Us

Psalm 71:1-6

Luke 13:10-17

How many of you have had a nickname in your life? I observe that often people get their nicknames based on some physical characteristic, something that somehow just defines who they are. Some of these names are famous - Pretty Boy Floyd, Jimmy The Schnoz Durante, Fats Domino, Tiny Tim, Hulk Hogan, Refrigerator Perry, Pudge Rodriguez. Some nicknames are not so famous and not particularly imaginative. I went to school with many of these: Knobbo, Stubbs, Lofty and Twigs. And then of course there was Curly, Freckles, Four-eyes and Pint-size ... that would be me... all four of me...

Nicknames are powerful. I know that most often they are given in a sense of good-natured teasing. But sometimes, hidden beneath the grin, there is an undercurrent of something more sinister... of an attempt to steal your name, to reshape your identity. Now most of the time, nicknames come and nicknames go. Sometimes we learn how to rise above them. Sometimes we grow out of them. Sometimes we use them as a challenge to overcome our physical limitations. But sometimes, sometimes they can actually carry such impact and import that they become us or we become them. Today we encounter such a woman... on this Sabbath Day, in this sanctuary... we meet the woman whose identity rests in her nickname... We meet the Bent Woman.

Please pray with me:

Lord God, we come to bend ourselves to you in faith that you bend yourself toward us. Lift our heads that we may see your face. Call us by name, that we may know ourselves Sons and Daughters of Abraham. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer.

Oh yes, some arthritis has set in, compounding the osteoporosis that is consuming her spine. But for so many years now this pain has wracked her being that it has become her physical and spiritual identity. Twisted, afflicted, bowed by life, she stoops toward the ground. Bent woman they call her. Bent Woman is what she calls herself. Luke tells us that she has been held captive by a spirit that has held her in bondage for eighteen years. This is a woman, as Homiletics professor Jana Childers¹ pointed out, who "not only has an infirmity but suffers with the spirit of infirmity." That's right, that's what the Scripture tells us: this is a woman "with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years."

I know this woman... don't you? We all know The Bent Woman...or The Bent Man, for that matter. The one who so completely identifies themselves by their illness that they can no longer envision wholeness. The one who has been unemployed so long they think they are unemployable. The one who has been so verbally or physically abused in their marriage they actually believe the terrible things their spouse says about them. The one who feels so overwhelmed financially they can't even imagine being debt free. The one who has so often been disappointed by others or by themselves they have forgotten how to hope for a different future. The one who can confess with his lips "God loves me. I am forgiven," but can't understand it in his heart. We all know The Bent Woman. From time to time—although our brokenness may be invisible to most people—God knows, from time to time, we are all bent, cowed by life, afflicted, twisted, misshapen ashamed not the way God intends for us to be.

And yet, somehow, the *God of Grace* meets us in the bent posture. Strangely and unexpectedly, we are inclined to a *God* who inclines to us. We lean to *God* because *God* leans to us. We worship a *God* who bends to meet us.

The psalmist understands this. The psalmist knows the nature of our *God* is such that he calls out: "O *God*, let me not be put to shame." And he understands how *God* works, for he implores *God* "Incline your ear to me and save me... for it was you I leaned on from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother's womb." You see, the psalmist understands that even as we are bent over with the pain or affliction or the shamefulness that besets us, *God* is of such a nature that *God* bends to us. *God* is the midwife who crouches to catch us in his arms and enfold us in his embrace. In *Jesus Christ*, *God* made flesh and dwelling among us, *God* stoops to deliver us.

In this ordinary sanctuary, on this ordinary Sabbath Day, in the middle of this ordinary congregation, *Jesus* sees this woman, bent over in her pain. She has asked for nothing. She has come, as we all have done, to worship *God*. *Jesus* has just finished teaching, speaking out the word, and then, he moves forward to enact it. To demonstrate to all the gathered just who *God* is. He sees the woman's need. But she is bowed to the ground... how could she possibly know that she is the one being addressed? With so low a focus, she cannot know that *Jesus* is close enough to touch her. She cannot lift her head to see him. So he stoops down, he bows low, perhaps he even kneels so that he can look up into her face to say "Woman, you are set free!"

Maybe it is the love in his eyes, or the gentleness in his voice. Perhaps it was the strength in his touch...for it was so long since she had open herself to the pain, the risk of being touched—the risk of being felt and seen and known as she truly is! Whatever it is—all of these combined, I'm sure—in this brief encounter she is reminded that—deep inside—she is not and was never intended to be Bent Woman. She is set free—not from the infirmity necessarily, but most importantly from the spirit of infirmity. And in response, the woman rises, straight and tall, and strong and true, and sings her praise to God.

In this ordinary sanctuary, on this ordinary Sabbath day, this is extraordinary worship. That's exactly what makes the leader of the synagogue so nervous. Wait, wait, wait, wait a minute! This is out of order, this does not fit in my worship bulletin! This is uncontrollable, this is unpredictable, this is not ordinary!

And Jesus says, in a way, you're right! Worship is extraordinary! For just as on an ordinary Sabbath day you rightfully tend to the animals in your care, how much more does God tend to us. Did you get that? We think worship is about what happens when we tend to God, but it is in fact what happens when God tends to us! Right and true worship is what takes place when we bend our hearts to discover the God who bends to us, and in so doing realize that all of ordinary life is imbued with the extraordinary.

And so extraordinary worship is possible—in the midst of our humdrum, anxious, routinized, back-breaking lives—whenever we realize that the Kingdom of God is at hand, standing right in front of us, waiting for us to lift our heads and see ...

when we understand that the kingdom of God is right here, waiting to be uncovered like that treasure of great price that was buried in the corner lot....like that other earring, that rolled behind the dresser and has been crying out for years to be found.

Extraordinary worship happens when our ordinary summer Sabbath day becomes transformed by the touch and the love and the boundless grace of a God who breaks the power of all that bends us down. Indeed, real and extraordinary worship happens when we are introduced to our very best selves—which are wiser and stronger and straighter and truer than we know.

You see, worship tells us who we are. It gives us our story. It connects us with our forebears in faith...those heroes we've been talking about lately—all those who traveled this road to witness to the power of God to transform them from ordinary to extraordinary. When we encounter God's story we discover that it is our story....and discover, not so much that we believe in God, but that God believes in us—believes in our capacity to become the people God intended us to be. We all need an encounter with the loving gaze and healing touch of Jesus to become defined—not as Stubby, or Stringbean, or Gimpy or Pint-size or Anxious or Doubtful, or Depressed, or Angry or Hopeless—but to become who we genuinely are.

When these things happen, all that is within us, like The Bent Woman, unwinds and straightens up to sing our praise to God, to laugh and rejoice that we are baptized in Christ, given our true identity, granted our proper name. No longer are we Bent Woman, Bent Man or whatever you may have called yourself but rather Daughters of Abraham ... Sons of the Father of Faith... Children of the Living God.

They call her

Bent Woman...
afflicted, twisted, cowed by life ...
Face to the ground
so she cannot see the
bright blue sky...
inclined permanently toward the dust from which she come
reminded
every
step
of the way
of her impending return
she leans
toward
death.
But ... can it be?
Here, in this congregation ...
in this place of worship...
On bended knee
He seeks her face
In gentle voice

He calls her

to lift her head
to lift her heart
to lift her face to heaven
where is her true citizenship...

And so—

set straight!
free and true,
whole and new—
she is named by

the One who
calls her

Daughter of Abraham
Free in Faith
Child of God.

ⁱ Jana Childers, "The Kyphotic Woman" *30 Good Minutes*, Chicago Sunday Evening Club, Program #4816, February 6, 2005