

Bent Not Broken

Jason Boyd; August 22, 2010

Kirkland Congregational Church; Kirkland, WA

Luke 13:10-17

It was somewhere in the neighborhood of 3 in the morning the Thursday before Labor Day in 2005. My phone rang. Now when you think of the phone ringing at 3 in the morning, it's hard not to think that something must be wrong. Being kind and considerate people, as well as needing our sleep, we generally don't call people at 3 in the morning just for kicks. But this wasn't going to be one of those dreaded calls. Quite the opposite in fact!

I answered the phone, and the voice on the other end said, "Hi, Uncle Jason." And immediately I smiled and knew the news that was coming. This was a call to let me know that my little nephew had just been born. His name is Jonas, and he will turn 5 in a little less than 2 weeks. I was ecstatic. I immediately started thinking of when I'd be able to travel to North Carolina to meet him – which I would do about 6 weeks later. Meeting the little guy for the first time was just wonderful. Sometime when you're in my office, ask me and I'll show you his picture.

I have traveled to North Carolina many times since then, to watch the little guy grow up, and to enjoy all the great things that come with being an uncle.

Jonas is also autistic. Mind you, this sermon isn't going to be about autism, although that is something I probably will talk about at some point in the future. Jonas faces challenges that other children don't face, and I'm grateful beyond measure for the terrific special education he is receiving in his school. As you know, autism manifests itself in different ways with different people, and one of the ways it has manifested itself in Jonas is that he is largely non-verbal. He can make certain sounds, he has some words, but a good bit of his communication is through pointing at pictures – to tell his parents what food he wants or what he wants to do, or even what video he wants to watch.

This has a lot of implications, but there is one in particular that is on my mind today and that I was really thinking about with this morning's verse from Luke – and this is probably my greatest fear – if, heaven forbid, someone abused Jonas, sexually or otherwise, he couldn't tell us. At least right now, he has no means he can use to communicate something like this; it would be something he'd be forced to keep to himself. Please know, I'm not about to tell you that this has happened to him – it hasn't. And I'm not about to tell you that something like this has happened to me – it hasn't. But it's a safe bet that most people in our congregation know someone who has been a victim of some sort of abuse - or other form of misconduct or inappropriate behavior, and we would be naïve to think that there aren't members of our church family who have found themselves in one of those kinds of situations.

It's a frightening thought, not being able to speak out or tell anyone you need help when something terrible happens, and this is of course the case with any form of abuse. The scenario I described with Jonas is one way that the voice of someone hurt could not be heard, but we know there are other ways.

We know that many people do face domestic abuse in their lives. We know that people have been sexually abused as children. We know that there are things done which do not qualify as abuse but still are things which people often feel compelled or threatened to keep silent, for which they might blame themselves when they bear no fault. We know that this happens to both men and women, but we know that in many of these circumstances the victim is more likely to be female. And we know that they all need healing to live the lives God hopes for them.

The text we heard from the Gospel according to Luke is not an unfamiliar one to many, we have heard it referred to as the “Bent Over Woman,” we know it is one of the most known of Jesus’ healing stories. As I read it, I wonder why we haven’t necessarily paid enough attention to the significance that this healing was specifically provided to a woman. Luke is the Gospel most inclusive of women, but even so, it doesn’t necessarily draw the attention we might want to pay it.

The leader of the synagogue was indignant because Jesus healed on the Sabbath. But I wonder if there was something else behind this. I wonder if this indignation is coming from somewhere else, from issues with women and whatever might ail a woman. It is no secret to history that Jesus’ openness to women and indeed his treatment of all as equal regardless of gender was not appealing to the religious authorities or much of society. It didn’t take long for the words attributed to the Apostle Paul to backpedal on Jesus’ embracing of women as equals.

So could it be that there was this poorly veiled indignation, this anger that wouldn’t have been present had our Bent Over Woman been a man? Perhaps a healing of a member of the religious authorities would have been more pleasing. The synagogue leader voiced his indignation but Jesus saw through it, reminding them that all did some things on the Sabbath which clearly could be considered work. So there had to be something else going on. There had to be some masking of the real reason for the anger – kind of like the folks who are so upset about the mosque which actually isn’t a mosque being built near Ground Zero say it isn’t about having issues with Muslims, kind of like the Tea Party insists whatever they do isn’t about race. This leader had his stated reason, but I just don’t buy it.

He might well have also been angry since Jesus wasn’t following the rules that he prescribed and as he saw them. When we hear that this woman had a spirit which had crippled her for 18 years, I wonder also if we’re hearing that Jesus freeing her from it was far more than that. The oppressive nature of the synagogue rules I suspect could have had more than a crippling effect on the spirits of many women, and we know that many of the so-called rules in many churches today still seek to do the same to women. No wonder she couldn’t stand straight.

But that isn’t Jesus. That isn’t Jesus at all. The synagogue leader may have mouthed that what Jesus did qualified as a work task that doesn’t keep the Sabbath holy. But if Jesus healing someone doesn’t keep the Sabbath holy, I haven’t the foggiest notion of what does. I can’t think of anything that keeps the Sabbath more holy than the healing power of Jesus.

And I can’t think of any place better for someone to be able to find healing than in a house of worship. This is where we’re supposed to do that, to find and experience Jesus, to see and feel that love being lived out by a community of people. When bad things happen, this is where

healing should start. If we've faced abuse or mistreatment, we know what that does to our spirits – and we know that if we cannot seek and find healing that is only magnified. For us to be a congregation that seeks to follow Christ and express His love, we must be an instrument of healing for others.

Somewhere around 20 years ago, about the time I was finishing college, and very shortly before the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings brought such matters to a closer place in our national consciousness, the Pastor of the church in which I was raised was accused what I'll simply describe as inappropriate behavior with some women in the congregation and on church staff. I should mention that I liked this Pastor very much, and he had helped me through one personally challenging situation for which I am still grateful all these years later. You might imagine that it was difficult for many, including myself, to hear these things – it was. Alas, nothing is simple.

Times have changed a bit since then, and I think watching the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings opened the eyes of a few people in that congregation as they struggled with what had taken place. But that doesn't mean that the stifling climate that exists for people who have stories to tell has disappeared – lessened perhaps, but not disappeared. There is still fear, there is still disbelief, there is still a lack of openness in the world to hear some stories – and this can keep women, and men, in that place where one's spirit is so hurting for longer than 18 years. This can keep people feeling as unable to tell their story as I know my nephew would be.

I know you to be a loving, caring congregation. I want you to know how much joy your bring me, how happy I am to see your faces each Sunday as well as other days of the week. I feel this connectedness and this love that is there to reach out to and for those in pain for any number of reasons. And I want to be sure that our voice of love is strong enough so that people know that if the story they need to tell includes having experienced mistreatment, abuse, or anything along those lines, that our presence and our love can be part of how they might find healing.

I have asked Terri to begin contacting organizations which work with some of the issues and conditions I've described, for the purpose of making literature available for people. We have 3 congregations who rent from us, and numerous other groups who bring people to our building each week. There is more than 1 way in which we can make this information available so that it is known that this matters to us, but we will also be making it available by placing it in a place where it is easily seen but also allows for one to take it in complete privacy. Yes, that means the restrooms. We have the ability to provide access to needed information which can help people who have been feeling like the Bent Over Woman find the healing they need to let their spirits be free and healthy and find a new way of understanding the Good News is for them.

Like with the woman in the text, a house of God should be the place where one can begin to heal. Let us make it so. Amen.