

“Between Text and Sermon”
Published in *Interpretation*, February 2000

On Luke 13: 10-17
by Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

Hand-wringing about Biblical illiteracy notwithstanding, sometimes the congregation knows a Bible story too well. In the case of the woman stooped for eighteen years by a “spirit of infirmity,” hearers may come to the text already knowing what Jesus must do, automatically sympathizing with the marginal person, their jaws predictably agape at the base motives of Jesus’ enemies. Or was that a yawn? Perhaps the planners of the common lectionary nimbly avoided this text because it seems to duplicate a half dozen others.

Boredom can serve a good purpose. When dull to a text, a preacher may be well served by assuming that her candle was blown out by none other than Holy Spirit’s out breath, urging her on toward new light on God’s word. May God bless us all with a will to abide with experiences of uninspired emptiness, lest we stuff the people with old too-told stories and leave no room for communion with the gospel.

That said, particularity is one of the mustard seeds that breaks life into the darkness. Consider the suffering of the stooped woman. No matter how common the disease, no one suffers generically. This woman was “bowed together” (the KJV translates the Greek literally, and quite successfully) and absolutely unable to—the Greek word is—*unbend*. In the interests of particularity, get up and try this disease for one minute. While badly bowed, look a tall man in the eye. Hug a child. Soak your face in the noonday sun. Lift your hands heavenward and make a joyful noise. Relate to your mate. What mate, after eighteen years? Social being is a complex eye/voice/ touch thing. Even if this woman’s society was respectful toward her, her ailment cut her off from its business and its pleasures. She was bent toward the dust, virtually faceless, cursed worse than Adam or Eve. Nevertheless, she appeared in the synagogue on the Sabbath. How and why did she get there? The text only says *Behold! A woman having a spirit of infirmity . . .*

When an adult appears in the gathering place of a religious community suddenly—that is, for the first time in a long time—she or he generally comes somewhat as an outcast. Often enough, it was by her own decision years and years ago. However that may be, the return is momentous. In the approach, which may take place over months or years, the building itself bears symbolic powers. On one hand, synagogue, church, or mosque physically present the claim that the people within have communication with God, with absolute reality. The architectural sign value says their ways *are* God’s ways, in some measure. Therefore, what they believe and do will have power to bend and shape whoever enters there. On the other hand, the building also symbolizes human desire to be communicated *to* God, into God’s reality, transformed as God chooses. Therefore, however bent on using religion to their own ends they are, nevertheless the vaulted roof, the spire, the minaret imply the willingness of the human to be lifted up, to leave behind the former things. “From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.” (Psalm 61: 2)

When people appear “just then” in our churches, we who are already there do not know whether they have come desiring to be re-formed on the last of a lost tradition, or yearning to be lifted up in a way not directly related to the religious community or tradition. If they have not articulated to themselves any clear reason for appearing just then, probes like these may seem altogether off the

mark. Nevertheless, bending and forming is the business of religion, and people know this when they appear. At its worst, the bending will be distortion to merely human specifications. At its best, the forming will be transforming. (The ease with which the preacher can play these metaphors points up the ambiguity in both our need of and our experience of change.) But however they ultimately fare who appear here, they bring with them the paradox of grace and will. For even if much impeded, each comes by his own will—no matter that we claim God has preveniently kindled that will. And still, having come, each is absolutely unable to stand up straight before God. The will is working *and* the will is worthless. Who is there that knows nothing of this blessing and this burden?

And behold! She's in the door. Then, in Jesus' presence and power at that gathering place, the woman was released from her "bendage." That's how she was saved: Jesus did it! In some present-day traditions of worship and preaching, the mere declaration, said loudly, frequently, and gladly enough, that "Jesus saves!" incites the believer to feel that the gospel is true and has been preached. But this approach will alienate many who walked in here expecting a bending and forming serious and practical enough to match their long experience of their will bent toward the dust. Their minds are clear and they want to ask, What exactly do you church people mean when you say that Jesus Christ can help? But they are too polite or too uncertain to ask out loud. Instead, they just present themselves. Behold! Now the great challenge for worship and preaching is to transform words about long-ago miracles into the present healing work of the church. As Krister Stendahl once put it, "Don't read from the cookbook; serve the meal!"

For this work, every congregation must re-invent the meal, to coin a phrase. Copying what others serve is often inimical to spiritual life. The actions of Jesus in this text suggest, but do not prescribe, how the church undertakes to do the saving work which Christ has given to it. The first suggestion is coiled in the little word "Behold!" Modern translators understandably abandon this archaic expression, but they might work harder at reproducing what it deftly accomplishes. The rhetorical effect of the Greek in v. 11 and v. 12 can be rendered this way. *And see here! A woman with a spirit of infirmity... And seeing her, Jesus called her over...* To make this point *in* a sermon would be ho-hum homiletics. To make this point *with* a sermon would be grace and gospel indeed, for the sermon is the primary way during worship that the bent sense that they are humanely seen and accepted. To be sure, the whole church must demonstrate how they live this out if the stranger is to find Christ here. In a manner fully obedient to this text, a sermon that conveys Christ-like seeing can meet one who has presented herself in hope of being seen.

When Jesus speaks, he sets the woman free unconditionally. No quid pro quo stands in the way of her reunion with humanity. No church law or liturgy intervenes with its forms, declaring that if you confess thus-and-so, then God will forgive such-and-such. Jesus has (perhaps literally) no time for such small print; he touches the woman. Though it is not immediately evident to the modern listener, the act of Jesus' touch in that social and religious context instantly breaks walls carefully erected by mortals. The holiness code of Leviticus 21:18-20 states, with reference to the temple sacrifices, that "no one who has a blemish shall draw near, nor one who is blind or lame, nor... a hunchback, nor a dwarf, nor..." In other words, the woman is ritually unclean. And she is a woman. In a society where men did not touch women not of their family, Jesus' immediate act of compassion upon the bent bends the rules of the society to the breaking point.

When preachers merely retell the too-told stories, this is the point where everyone is encouraged to cheer, as if Jesus had just slam-dunked one. Then, when the referees come out on the court to quibble with his methods, the booing and cheering only grow louder. Yet when *today's* rules are

broken by servants of Christ, few in the churches cheer. Therefore, we may conclude that the booing and cheering response are far from God's truth and probably prevent our hearing the gospel. To abandon this generic and boring set piece, the preacher must not move so directly between text and sermon. Rather, he looks for the particular. She begins with an assumption that now and always, acts of Christ's living body will bear the marks of the cross: they will still touch those bent down and immediately bend back the rules and bars that bow them down; they will still dismay the law-abiding; they will still run terrible risks for the sake of compassion. To put it another way, real opposition to God's living work does not come from predictable enemies. That's the too-told story. Rather, opposition to God comes from within us, from commitments we have nailed down while God Holy Spirit was blowing where s/he wills. In the particular congregation, this endlessly inventive fear of God's freedom takes particular form. The preacher needs to believe that the whole people of God present themselves at the door of the synagogue even so that this paralyzing ailment in their nature may be seen, and that the love of God may lift them up, proclaiming "You are set free from your infirmity."

Then may they and their manifold voice rise, praising God. ■