

The touch of freedom

Sermon to Luke 13 v 10-17

You have just heard the story of the bent-over woman.

God's touch of freedom - in the story of the healing of the bent-over woman – is reported to us by Luke immediately proceeding Jesus' words on what the kingdom of God is like; proceeding the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast...

The story of the liberation of the bent-over woman suggests another place where the kingdom of God can be experienced: in the bent-over body of this woman.

Jesus sees deeply into the years of pain this unnamed woman has gone through - not only because of her physical condition, but also from the community's attitude towards those whose bodies do not appear „normal“. (In Jesus' days – and often in ours – physical difference was considered a curse, a sign of an individual's sin. To come into physical contact with such a person put one at risk of being cursed as well.)

The story of Jesus meeting with the bent-over woman is dramatic - not only because of the healing that comes to the woman, but also the healing that comes to the community. The community also receives Jesus' freeing touch as it begins to learn about care: the care God calls us to have for one another.

With Jesus' touch of the woman's body, with her song of praise, and with the community's rejoicing, this story challenges us. We are to consider how we participate in the diminishment of people around us and how we could provide the conditions for healing to happen for us all – physical healing, emotional healing, relationship healing and even economic healing...

Healing for those who suffer from poor health, injured souls, broken up relationships and material poverty...

When – 3 weeks ago - I saw these five paintings over there on the wall I was immediately fascinated. They had caught my attention, and they didn't let me go. I liked them. (I liked them so much that I even had Jan take my photo for the new church directory in front of them.) I would like to thank the church youth for painting them and for sharing their ideas about them with me!

I had always liked this woman's story from Luke 13. And what probably attracted me most to these paintings is the fact that they are life size. The woman there, or the women: the one bent, the one touched, the one standing up, the one threatened by the dark, and last but not least the one dancing under God's rainbow are almost as tall as I am. It is their size that lets us get really close to them. It is as if they are looking me in the eye. Talking to me face to face. Communicating with me.

*(picture one)*

I would like to invite you to look with me at the first of those 5 banners.

It is very dark in this picture. A huge eye is constantly watching and making the figure below feeling awfully trapped. This human being is not only bent but all alone, burdened, helpless and hopeless, always facing the ground, never stretching out, rising up and looking ahead...

This woman can only see the dirt and the stones on the ground in front of her – for 18 long years... unbearable, isn't it?!

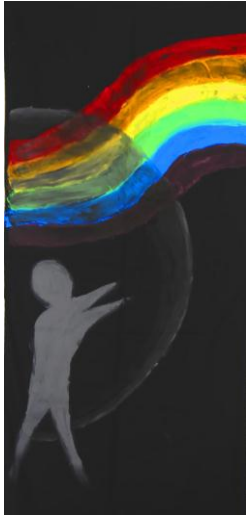
*(picture two)*

In the second painting we can see Jesus asking the woman to come to him. Jesus in full colour, is bringing the colours of life into the woman's sad story. She is still bent. And there are people with dark faces around her, restricting her, observing her, limiting her... But the power that comes from Jesus is stronger than the evil of the context in which the woman was forced to live. Jesus, once and for all, takes away what makes her small and breaks her.

(picture three)

Jesus laid his hands on the woman, and immediately she stood up and praised God. Strong green hands symbolize the touch of Jesus. Green is the colour of hope, and that is what Jesus is giving this woman: hope and freedom, and a new life. The dress of the woman has a new colour! She can now stand. She can look straight ahead of her. Her whole life is now changed.



*(picture four)*

But, there is the leader of the synagogue – angry about the healing performed on a Sabbath. Both his hands are directed towards the women and accuse her and Jesus. This man brings a huge black cloud into the picture. He prohibits the happiness and the joy of the woman. His reaction threatens to prevent the healing... to throw the woman back into sadness and captivity... But his anger only reaches a small part of the rainbow and overshadows it. The rest of the rainbow remains as colourful as the woman's new life...

*(picture five)*

...and there she dances and praises God. The woman is painted in red. The colour symbolizes the joy of life which the woman can now feel. She dances under the rainbow and reminds us all of God's promise to care for his people.

Enough comment on the pictures... Let us now come back to the text.

In a book about Asian women and their theology I read the following passage by a Japanese pastor, Marianne Katopo:

"As a woman I always have felt bent and distorted. As a matter of fact, I still often feel that way. And it is the power of Jesus which liberates the woman, in the space of the kingdom of God; so that the woman can stretch herself to full length, and glorify God. This is what it's all about: liberation, power, glorification. How good is the work that is being done by bent and distorted people within a structure that leaves them no room for „stretching to their full length“!?

Are we so fearful, have we so little confidence in the power of Christ and the kingdom of God, that we don't want all God's people stretching to their full length? Are we like the oppressors, who keep dangerous prisoners in tiger cages?"

You may think, this is a different cultural background, this is one person's individual experience... But still I am sure, it is worth following her questions. And I would like to add a few more that might keep us reflecting lives and structures of our own and of other people:

Do we – you and I – live to our full length, as Marianne Katoppo calls it?

Are we allowed to?

And if we are so, who are we then in the face of those who live at less than full length?

Are we on the oppressors' sides? And if we are, what can we do, what must we do to change this?

Looking at the story of the bent-over woman might help us to find an answer. In Luke 13 the head of the synagogue really could not appreciate Jesus' healing the woman at all. After all it was a Sabbath day. And law and order should have been obeyed... even if that meant that this woman was excluded from salvation... Jesus calls these spiritual leaders hypocrites, and throws the question right back at them: „If you free on the Sabbath your ox and your donkey to let them drink, what then have you to say of my act regarding this woman? Is she not a daughter of Abraham?“

Jesus lifts up the woman to what she is. A daughter of Abraham (and Sarah I would of course like to add ☺), faced with the hypocrites who taught that they were the sons of Abraham. Yet they failed to understand the essence of their own Torah. The woman is a daughter of Abraham, she does not have to become it by one or another achievement...

For 18 years she has been bound by the power of evil (which is not sent by God, nor by Satan, but comes right from the society, the circumstances, the context she lives in) – and the only thing it needs to liberate her is the hand of Jesus. There is no need for anything else. No approval of authorities, no proof from the woman's side. She is who she is: a daughter of Abraham. Valuable. Precious. Unique. Gifted. Acknowledged. Recognized. Independent. Free.

I know of so many men and women who cannot live to their full length. And I am sure you do as well.

There are so many situations, institutions, life systems that keep men and women from living liberated, self determined lives...

Just try to remember... your own life story, those of friends and others...

Think about where you grew up and how you are living now...

Think about church, about your family.

Remember times and places where you were helped to stretch to your full length, where you were allowed to be who you are and where you were supported to develop and grow...

And if it is not too painful, think of situations where you had to meet resistance to release and liberation, where you were forced to stay smaller than you are, where you had to bend or where you had to hide your true self and give up ideas, dreams and visions...

The problem in this story does not only lie in the fact of the woman's disability but in her community's seeming unwillingness to heal itself.

In a sense they are more disabled than she is.

Their traditions, their attitudes, their beliefs bend them deeply! Their stereotypes about people who look, walk, act and live differently have dulled their compassion.

They have lost or never really had the ability to be whole members of a whole community. They may pity the woman or feel sympathy for her, but such emotions do not release them or her from their broken relationship.

Jesus' touch does more than heal the woman of her physical condition. It breaks barriers. It shatters stereotypes. It goes against the expected norms of behaviour. Everything he does calls attention to the woman and to his act:

He calls her...

He touches her...

He does this on a Sabbath...

Not content to leave this woman in the shadows or to cure her quietly, Jesus wants his healing of the woman to spill over into the entire community.

With what Jesus does, he calls the community beyond the boundaries of tradition.

He questions their physical ideals. He disturbs their sense of conformity...

He does this in order to show them that being a community means creating the conditions for people to be who God created them to be... in whatever body they happen to be.

Jesus shows us that touching others can always allow our deepest selves to be touched as well.

This is a real challenge for the community then and now. It is a call to freedom for us here today. A provocation...

Are we able to enlarge our boundaries to let in those who have lived at less than full stretch?

Do we want to do so after all?

What would it cost us?

What would we have to change in our behaviour?

What would we have to learn, and what to let go?

The bent-over woman could not straighten up by her own strength and power. She could not heal herself.

We, too, must acknowledge that in our world there are victims of injustice who cannot heal themselves, – there are unfair laws and traditions...

If they could have changed the situations themselves, they would not have been waiting for so long...

With the touch of freedom in the bent-over woman's story of liberation

Jesus challenges us to make the story of the victims our story. To make their struggle our struggle.

Jesus teaches us that there are not many little struggles or many individual struggles for freedom; it is one common struggle in the whole big history of humankind: the struggle to become human and whole... and share our humanity and our wholeness with the world.

Because the same God created us, we belong to one another. However different we are... And as long as anyone remains bent over, no one can really stretch to full length and stand fully upright.

When one is lifted, we are all lifted.

And then we all can rejoice at the glorious things which Jesus has done - and which we are all enabled to do.

When one is empowered, we are all empowered.

In order to show this Jesus could not cure the woman quietly and secretly. She should not praise God alone, they all should stand up and rejoice.

And they did.

So what is left to do for us? (*pause*)

Who are we in that story? (*pause*)

I so pray to God that none of us has to identify with the leader in the dark, but that we can all be rejoicing dancers under God's rainbow and liberate and heal each other.

Amen.