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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Proper 16C
Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalm 71:1-6
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.**

Amen.

And just then appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

I wonder how many times that woman had come to that same place of worship in her life, and when it was that the vision of those around her became as narrow as her own.

For being bent over and unable to look up, except with slanted sidelong glances, her own vision was indeed narrow.

She could not feel the warmth of the sun on her face, but rather saw the shadows it created as it shown on the world around her. She could not look into the face of others, instead learning to know them by the shape and size of their feet.

She knew her way around her world by landmarks that most people never noticed – the nuances of dusty paths, chipped stone foundations, and the detritus of the street.¹

And yet, for all her narrowness of vision, what of those around her? Did they notice this woman at all anymore? Did her hunched over back warrant a second glance or thought? Did anyone remember the color of her eyes, or the strength in her straight nose?

Jesus noticed.

Jesus noticed her passing by the assembled group, and he did something. The woman didn't ask for healing, but it was given to her, with words, and through touch.

And in a split second her vision, her world, her life, was changed!

By default the life of those around her was changed as well. We see some of that played out in rest of our passage, as Jesus and the leader of the synagogue bandied back and forth; two faithful men who were struggling with what it meant to be faithful according to their vision of the Sabbath.²

But what of the woman's family? Her neighbors? How did her healing affect their vision? Were they all content to simply praise God for her healing, and go on in their "new normal," or did they feel called to expand their vision of the world around them, just as her vision was transformed?

¹ Some ideas taken from *Tuesday Lectionary Leanings* on RevGalPals blog.

² Kathryn Matthews, *Sermon Seeds*.

This Gospel story is compelling for so many reasons, not the least of which is that it invites us into the reality that all too often, we too, are stuck in the narrowness of our vision.

Sometimes we have no choice in how our vision is limited. We are like the woman who was bent over, whether what bends us over is the shortcomings of our bodies or our minds, the weight of financial worries, the tension of family discord, or knowing the pain and oppression of being marginalized by society.

Other times it is our own choices that narrow our vision of the world around us. Like the leader of the synagogue, we may be faithful people and yet let the *shoulds* rule us, distorting how we see ourselves, others, and the world.

I *should* take on that extra project at work (even though it will mean less time with my family). I *should* say yes to my friend's request to go out for coffee (even though I don't feel like I have anything left to give of myself right now). I *should* pray more (even though I don't seem to know where to begin these days).

And before we know it we are bent over under so much weight.

What is it that bends you over, weighs you down, and narrows your vision? Do you need to think about it, or has your mind already touched on what you know hunches you over? How about the person sitting next to you? Do you know? Or the woman in line in front of you at the grocery store? Can you guess? How about the man crossing the street in front of you as you wait at the stoplight? Do you ever wonder?

It is important to reflect on, and identify, what it is that bends us over. It is just as important to realize that nearly everyone we pass in daily life is also bent over because of one thing or another.

But we don't have to just live with it.

Jesus offered healing to the woman who walked past him, and that same healing is there for us. God's unconditional love heals us. Even when we don't ask for it, it is always there waiting for us to grasp it, waiting for us to open our hearts. And when we do open our hearts and let God's love touch us, like Jesus touched that woman, we can know healing.

Of the many ways in which we experience God's love, I have known it most clearly through community. Something of the unboundeness of God's love is known when we truly know other people and they in turn know us; when we journey together in this life throughout our woes and joys; when we accept help when we need it and offer it when others do.

It is through community, through relationships with others, that healing therefore happens. Sometimes we are "bent out of shape" in small ways and it may be something as simple as singing a favorite hymn or enjoying light conversation at coffee hour that heals us. Sometimes something terrible suddenly happens and yet the seed of healing is already planted in us because we know that we only have to call, and clergy and other pastoral care givers will be there with us.

And when we experience God's love through others, we know that the healing can't end with us. Like the bent over woman, our joy at being healed leads us to praise God, and creates in us a spirit that wants to pass on the good news. We heal each other so that we can heal the world, and work towards the reign of God.

Theologian Hans Kung wrote that the reign of God is "God's creation healed." Jesus's life, death and resurrection began this healing, opening up our vision to the reign of God. And through our healing, we are called to also enflesh God's healing love in the world.

Our call is to use our new vision, broken free from narrowness, to look at the world around us and see where people and systems and creation itself are bent out of shape.

Once our vision is opened, it's hard not to look away from all that we see, but in spite of that, we're not only called to witness, we are called to action. Jesus did not merely watch the bent over woman walk past, he reached out to touch her. It is not enough for us to just see where healing is needed, we are called to strive to heal it in any way we can.

Sometimes we can heal pieces of it by ourselves because of our own gifts, talents and experiences. But more often than not it is when we band together that we are most effective at spreading God's healing love – when we support families in need through Mt. Airy NET, when we open our Thrift Shop to folks in our community who have faced tragedy, when gather our prayers together weekly in what could be a laundry list of names – but is a chorus of love offered to God.

This week I invite you to spend some time reflecting on what bends you over, and what healing will set you free. On how healing might open up your vision of the world around you, and how it is that you, and we, are to be God's heart and hands in this world.

In the words United Church of Christ pastor and scholar Kathryn Matthews, "We're not here each Sunday because we simply enjoy one another's company. We are not here because we like to sing or see our friends or just because we feel we should be in church, or even because someone is pressuring or influencing us to be here. No, I don't believe that. I believe that we are here this morning because somewhere in the deepest part of our spirit is a hunger for the reign of God. I believe that we long for the healing, and the justice, and the love and acceptance, and the peace that is the reign of God. We are here because we've come to know that we can't fix this world on our own, or even provide for ourselves on our own, and that our only real choice is to turn to God and one another."

~ AMEN ~