

BENT BECOMES STRAIGHT

THE GRACE OF THE KINGDOM

Luke 13.10-17

Introduction

My maternal grandmother was a hunchback. We don't say that these days. But when I was a kid that is what all the other kids described her as. She was bent over double with a curvature of the spine. It was embarrassing as the other kids thought my tiny grandmother was a witch. In fact she was a fine and gentle Christian lady to whose prayers I owe my own conversion to the Christian faith.

Luke is the consummate story teller and this little story, unique to Luke shows all of his skills. He weaves two stories into the larger story; the story of a disabled woman and the story of an angry, powerful and hypocritical man.

This little miracle story lends itself to imaginative reflection. Almost every action and word can have an impact if we take the time over them.

So this morning I want you to imagine that you have been following Jesus, an interested bystander perhaps. You have caught some of Jesus' words about discipleship and wondered what they are all about.

You wonder, How can this man make such claims on people? And what on earth does he mean by the kingdom. The kingdom of David is long gone and all we have now is toadying Jewish leaders, powerful Romans or revolutionaries. I, along with friends, are interested to hear about that but we are still confused.

Recounting the story

I have just followed Jesus into the synagogue. Maybe we will find out some more but I can't think that our synagogue leader is going to let him expound on the scripture reading.

It's a Sabbath. Now Sabbath is pretty important. On Sabbath we show the rest of the world who we are, publicly. We are not pagan idolaters. We worship the one true God who has given us this sign as a public witness. And we take it seriously. There are lots of things we are not allowed to do but there are some things we can. Sometimes it seems pretty arbitrary like you know, what knots we can and cannot tie or untie on Sabbath, but it makes us who we are.

Well, here we are and the synagogue service is proceeding. Obadiah our leader is doing his job of keeping the service under control. Loves the power but he is good at it.

And there is Joshua and old bent up Ruth over there. Scary old bird twisted up like that. Seems like forever but thinking about it it's only about 18 years. Can't figure out what happened. One day she was straight as a die and before long like a twisted old tree trunk. Shame really. I'm told she was quite attractive.

No one will touch her now. Too shame-making. Obadiah says God doesn't like imperfect things. Funny God. Must be something wrong with her. Always on the outer now. Can't mix it with us men. Cops a bit of abuse from the village kids, too. Never spoken to her of course so I don't know what she thinks about it.

Jesus is behaving himself. I've heard they have had trouble with him before in Nazareth and elsewhere. Thrown out a couple of times.

Jesus has spotted old Ruth over among the women and he is giving her a long stare. I don't have a good feeling about this. What's he doing? He's calling her over to him. How come she is coming to where the men stand? God, she's a woman. She can't come into

the centre of the synagogue amongst the men. That will upset the lads. That's destroyed the worship for the day. What's old Obadiah going to do? No precedence for this.

Jesus is talking to her – it's going from bad to worse. I'll shove in closer.

“Woman you are set free from your ailment.”

He's touching her! The day just isn't getting any better.

She's as straight as a die, like I remember years ago. Ruth's shouting something. Something about praise God, thanks be to God, halleluiah. It's chaos. All eyes are on Jesus; forget the worship. Obadiah is boiling. Everyone is ducking.

Hello, Obadiah has taken charge. Boy is he angry. Sanctimonious git has been running the synagogue as though it was his for years. What's he saying?

“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

Wait a minute, he is haranguing us not Jesus. We didn't do anything, Jesus did. We know the rules. Is he too afraid of Jesus to tell him to his face?

The puffed up git is really only worried about who is boss. He knows he has been upstaged but, that is not a bad point about the Sabbath. Like all those educated people Obadiah likes to strut his stuff so I suppose Jesus is well and truly rebuked in public. Obadiah is trying hard to humiliate Jesus, using the old trick of superior knowledge and status.

Jesus is turning towards Obadiah. I'm told he's not bad on the smart response but he's looking a lot more serious.

“You hypocrites.”

O dear me. We are in trouble. I'm told he uses this word when he gets worked up about double standards or something. I'm told he wants people to be truthful. He wants peoples' motives and intentions to be at one with their actions. What an incredible idea. He hates people who play act. I thought that was what leaders did.

Now he is instructing Obadiah in the fine points of the law. Obadiah won't like that. Thinks he knows it all. Always saying he's too old to be taught anything.

“Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water?”

Well, of course. Obadiah taught us that in Sabbath school. What's the point?

“And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom the satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”

Man, he just impaled Obadiah on his own logic. I can only see trouble.

Everyone is jumping around yelling. Uproar. Obadiah has a red face and a long memory. Jesus better watch his back. Shaming the likes of Obadiah in public is treacherous ground.

Recounting the lesson

Man this is straining my brain. What is he saying? Daughter of Abraham? I know about sons of Abraham but daughter of Abraham? Old twisted Ruth, butt of village jokes, is my equal? Women walking into the centre of the synagogue? Women my equal? What sort of kingdom is this?

But this argument – she is greater than my donkey so if I take my donkey for a drink on Sabbath why not set this woman free. I do not know what to do with this argument. If we apply this argument then the Sabbath should be given over setting people free and

celebrating it. Never heard such nonsense before. And especially over an old woman.

There is something else going on here and it is giving me a headache trying to figure it out. I think there is something here about us. Are we like Ruth? Are we twisted, bent, held captive? Is this what he means about tight boundaries, rigid Sabbath laws? Is he saying something like we need to be set free and then set others free? And he is the one to do it. Is he saying that there is something more important than our national identity? Is he saying that God is more interested our twistedness than in our being a pure people? Is he saying that God is more interested in setting people free than our purity?

There is all this buzz going on in my head. There is something completely upside down and inside out in what Jesus is saying. But I have to say, 'Free from all that binds' that would be a relief. Free to celebrate, free to love, free from shame, free from violence and hatred, that would be different.

Mmmmm Let's have lunch