9 November 2025, Harbor Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Luke 13:10-17, "Healing the Bent Over Woman: Sabbath, Freedom and Inclusion" Tom Wagner

Several months after college graduation I started an archival internship at the Brethren Historical Library & Archives, housed in the Church of the Brethren denominational offices in Elgin, Illinois. Though I didn't have a car, I could **often hitch a ride** back to Indiana with senior staff members traveling east. Many of these folks were in their 50s and 60s and had witnessed significant cultural changes in the denomination during their lifetimes but were aware that **Dunker assimilation** had moved slower in some parts of the country. Those factors piqued their curiosity about some of my antiquated lifestyle choices. During one of those conversations a high-ranking staff member who had grown up on the western plains mentioned that **attending Sunday afternoon movies** was *verboten* during her 1930s youth. She wondered if I grew up with that restriction during my eastern Pennsylvania 1960s childhood. I laughed as I responded that issue never came up in our household, primarily because we **very rarely attended movies** at all. By the time I started college I could count on one hand the number of times our family had gone to a theater or drive in. Though we had no rule against movies, I suspect my family's habits were influenced by earlier restrictive practices which were highly suspicious of entertainment. One of my dad's younger brothers recalls visits to their very traditional maternal grandparents in the 1940s. "Grandma Light would tell the Wagner kids, 'Sunday is a full day of rest; no baseball or other games. **Time to sit and visit.**'" Even if Sundays weren't nearly that strict during my youth, I do remember when most businesses--even grocery stores and gas stations--were closed Sundays requiring folks to plan ahead a bit not to run out of supplies. Even so, farm families always had morning and evening chores. First responders and many health care workers often worked a full shift on Sundays.

The story of "**The Bent over Woman**" is found only in the Gospel According to Luke. The third gospel is the first part of a two-volume work by the same author. While the gospel focuses on the life and teachings of Jesus, the second installment, known as The Acts of the Apostles records the spread of the Jesus movement. As you may recall from some of my past sermons, each gospel presents the life and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth from a different perspective. While Mark reports him as a man of action, Matthew presents him as the long-awaited messiah. John speaks of him as the man from above. **Luke presents Jesus as a universal figure**, connecting the life of the Palestinian Jew with the broader context of the Roman Empire. One example of this is the way the author uses the reigns of emperors Augustus and Tiberius as time signatures. Luke also focuses more on the social justice themes in Jesus' teachings than the other gospels.

Luke places the story among the episodes about Jesus and his followers' **journey from Galilee to Jerusalem** in 9:51- 19:28. This episode will be the very last time Jesus teaches in a synagogue. The story contains elements of Sabbath controversies, healing stories and possibly even exorcisms. Yet in each case this story doesn't completely fit the formulas. **Exorcism** presents the weakest category, though the woman is said to be bent over due to a "spirit of infirmity" (weakness) and described later as having been bound by Satan, there is no reference to "casting out" a demon or evil spirit in Jesus' action. This is definitely a **healing** story since a woman who has lived in a bent over posture for 18 years finally gains the strength to stand up straight again. Curiously, in this case Jesus doesn't use typical phrases like, "Be healed", "Your faith has made you well" or even "Your sins are forgiven". Rather he says, "***Woman, you are freed of your infirmity.***" (I'll look at the deeper meaning of that wording a bit later.) In turn the healing creates **controversy** between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue.

The controversy about Sabbath observance isn't just about following the letter of the law versus following the spirit of the law. Another way to frame the disagreement concerns what one is **permitted** on sabbath and what one is **obliged** to do. The difference is rooted in two separate rationales for the day of rest written in the Torah. Both readings required members of the community, servants, livestock and even resident aliens to rest on the 7th day. The synagogue leader's rebuke, "*There are six days on which work **ought** to be done; come on those days to be healed, and not on the sabbath*." likely references **Exodus 20:8-11.** That passage based sabbath rest on the story in which **YHWH created the cosmos in 6 days** and rested on the 7th. Words Jesus uses as he heals the woman and later responds to the synagogue leader's objection (freed, untie, loosed) indicate he is following

Deuteronomy 5:12-15, which based sabbath rest on remembering that **YHWH freed them from slavery in Egypt.** Those words also echo the release of debt slaves during the 7th or sabbatical year following 6 years of service.

Jesus counters the leader's **"ought"** with another "**ought**" as he uses a common rhetorical device of stating a lesser example to make greater point. In this case he reminds the audience that if they **untie and lead their livestock to water** on the sabbath, how much more that a woman, a member of the community, **a daughter of Abraham** and Sarah should be **loosed or untied from her 18-year bondage.** Her sabbatical freedom was long overdue**.** Surely those who heard his argument were reminded how humans and animals were included in the 7th day of rest in both the Exodus and Deuteronomy texts.

Luke may have incorporated a common depiction of enslaved and free people from the dominate Greco-Roman culture. Most of his audience were either Hellenized Jews or Gentile converts familiar with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures known as the Septuagint, but also Greco-Roman artwork. They would have been familiar with images of **enslaved people bent over** while **free people were depicted standing upright**. Also, after the destruction of Jerusalem in 73 C.E. **Rome circulated coins** stamped with an image of a bent over woman symbolizing the empire's final subjection of Palestinian Jews. The point was emphasized not only by the person's posture, but also her gender.

When we tell a story with a point or lesson behind it, the point often shapes the way we tell the story. I'm reminded of how **my Dad often told the story of his paternal grandmother's death**. Both my Great-grandparents were natives of eastern Pennsylvania, but had lived, farmed and raised their family on the eastern shore of Maryland. Six of their eight children, including my Grandpa Wagner, moved back to Pennsylvania as they each reached adulthood. In the fall of 1952, my Great-Grandparents had driven up to Pennsylvania to attend a friend's funeral. That evening they joined my grandparents' family for supper. Reflecting on the day, Great-Grandma Wagner commented, **"You just never know who will be next."** A few moments later she slumped over in her chair at the table. As Dad told the story, it ended there with no more details. Years later when I was working on family history, one of Dad's cousins told me the rest of the story. Great-Grandma Wagner was diabetic and not particularly disciplined in taking her insulin. She had had diabetic seizure at the table but survived the night and was feeling well enough the next morning that, her and Great-Grandpa were getting ready for the drive back to Maryland. Before they got underway, she had a stroke. She lingered a couple of days before she died. While Dad didn't give the full record of those last days, the abrupt ending of his version of the story made an impressive point about **the fragility of life**.

I suspect Luke crafted his narrative about the bent over woman to support themes of his larger work, even down to echoing particular words. Seen in that light, the story takes on a metaphoric purpose. Hope, liberation and utopian visions are common themes in Luke's work.
Think of the lines from Mary's song commonly known as the Magnificat; *"**He has shown strength in his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away***." (1: 51-53)
Luke quotes Isaiah in reference to John the Baptist's ministry, "***Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places made smooth, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.*"** (3:5-6)
During his inaugural sermon at his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus reads Isaiah's words, "***The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.***" (4: 18-19)

In a way the first story of Jesus teaching at the synagogue at Nazareth and final synagogue appearance in today's story serve as bookends. Isaiah's words presented **a platform or manifesto**. The healing of **the bent over woman helps incarnate those words**, telling the story of healing in the language of liberation.

Something else unique about this story is that it is the only **sabbath controversy with a woman present**. Also, in most healing stories involving a woman usually take place in a private domestic scene. Think about the healing of Peter's mother-in-law (4:38-41 and parallels). Once her fever is gone, she immediately begins serving her guests. However, the bent over woman **is healed in a very public place** where men are clearly in charge. Having some sense of the role of women in 1st century C.E. Roman occupied Palestine, I'm surprised the synagogue leader wasn't also a bit upset about the focus on a woman.

It's interesting to note the movement of this woman **from the periphery to center stage**. She gathered in the room with the rest of the community. Jesus notices her disability and calls her forward. He releases her from her bondage (heals her), **giving her the strength to stand up right**. Not only has he freed her, but he has also **empowered** her within her community. While most of us grew up thinking of a prayerful posture as either kneeling or at least bowing our heads, standing with arms raised was the common stance for prayer and praise in ancient times. It is a frequent motif found in artwork on tombs in the catacombs, a woman standing up right raising her hands. The once bent over woman **is performing public worship**. Considering Luke has traditionally been thought to be a companion of the Apostle Paul, I wonder if Luke just had a different opinion of the role of women in faith community leadership, or have we been misreading Paul's writings? Furthermore, in response to the synagogue leader, Jesus identifies the woman as a "**daughter of Abraham"**. It is an act of inclusion, much like he will do a few chapters later when he declares **Zacheus a "son of Abraham".**

We may not be health workers or healers, yet **we can include and empower folks on the margins.** Perhaps at times we are the source of disability in our attitudes towards other people that ties them down. **Tolstoy** is often quoted, "***Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself***." We can pay attention and discern abilities, skills and talents, fully valuing the contributions of each and every person in our community. We can better recognize "**the inherent worth and dignity of every person"** regardless of abilities.

Notes

Natalie K. Houghtry-Haddon, *Changed Imagination, Changed Obedience: Social Imagination and the Bent-Over Woman in Luke's Gospel,* (Eugene, OR; Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).