

Has anyone here ever experience back trouble? I'm afraid it's pretty common. Move wrong. Lift wrong. And there it goes!

Not too long ago, a minister friend, Cynthia, (who serves a church in North Jersey) told me that all it took for her back to go out was to get in the car at a restaurant. Fortunately, her husband Jeffrey was with her. He drove her home. She said it took them 15 minutes to get her out of the car and up the 3 steps to the front door of the house--a painful pilgrimage that wasn't very far at all. By the time they reached the door, Cynthia was hurting so badly, she literally couldn't lift her foot up to get over the one step threshold of the front door. So you have to picture this: (remember she is bent in half from the sitting position she was in in the car). Jeffrey turned her sideways and gently toppled her into the house. Now her upper body was in the house, but her legs were still outside. So Jeffrey picked up her feet, lifted them high into the air, turned her on her back, and then dragged her inside the house by her ankles.

As he was doing this, they heard a car horn. One of Cynthia's congregants who lived in the neighborhood drove by just at that moment--just in time to see Jeff dragging her inside by her ankles. I'm sure there were a lot of texts and Facebook posts in the next couple of hours flying around the congregation, until Jeffrey put the truth about her bad back on the prayer chain. (Just as an aside here, my dad used to call a church prayer chain "the hot line!" If you wanted to get news out about anyone in the church, just call "the hot line!")

The fascinating story we read from Luke 13 this morning is about a woman with a serious back problem. The story doesn't provide many details. Was it arthritis, curvature of the spine, a muscle problem, the consequence of a back injury that had not healed properly? One commentary I read guessed that she had a condition call ankylosing spondylitis—a painful back problem where it feels less painful to lean forward. However, over time, the bones fuse that way and you can't straighten up anymore. Well, the truth is, we just don't know, but the writer does tell us that she had suffered for 18 years and could not straighten herself. I suppose that after 18 years, it had become an excepted way of life for her.

I'm sure her neighbors were accustomed to seeing her like that, making her painful way down the road—to the market—wherever. Obviously you would recognize her from a distance. She was the crooked lady,

Even though no one paid any attention to her in the synagogue, Jesus noticed her. It was the Sabbath, and many people were gathered for worship. The men and boys had the places of prominence upfront in those days. The women were restricted to the back of the room, or a balcony in the rear of the temple—a poor vantage point to see and hear, especially for someone bent double. But maybe she preferred it that way. Even after 18 long years, she might still have been self-conscious about her handicap.

Obviously, she did not have a part to play in worship. She was just one of those faithful souls who just wanted to be present in God's house.

But Jesus saw her. It seems as though his eyes could always find the loneliest and neediest person in any crowd. The room could have been filled to capacity with men of great stature, but still Jesus would have still seen this crooked little woman, half hidden by the others. With love, compassion, power, and authority, he called out to her: "You are free of your trouble. You have been bent out of shape long enough. It's time to straighten up. It's time to stand tall!"

Then he touched her gently—a touch of love, a touch of encouragement, a touch of healing—and immediately, she straightened up and began to praise God. She didn't stop to argue or debate or wonder how this happened. She simply responded to what Jesus said.

Now, I can't honestly explain what happened there, but she was healed, she was made whole, she stood up straight--and her crooked days were over. And they all lived happily ever after—end of story, right? Wrong!

It would have been great if everyone in the synagogue had cheered and run over to congratulate the woman, but that's not what happened. As so often happens, one person was there to rain on her parade of good fortune. In this case, the spoilsport was none other than the president of the synagogue, a man who, in my opinion, took himself way too seriously and saw himself as the watchdog of the rules. He wanted to be sure that all the T's were crossed and all the I's were dotted. Look, there were rules, and he felt obliged to remind people about those rules.

Luke 13 says he was indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. So he instructed Jesus and the woman in the rules: “Now see here, there are six days to be healed. If you want to be healed, come on those days, not on the Sabbath. It's against the rules to be healed on the Sabbath.”

But Jesus responded. He called that attitude hypocrisy. He pointed out that even very devout people take care of their livestock on the Sabbath. So why not heal this hurting woman? Eighteen years was long enough to be bent double. She shouldn't have to wait even one more day.

This is a great story, isn't it? It has everything--suffering and healing, laws and Grace, bad news and good news, pride and humility, legalism and love, problems and solutions.

This story is important for us, because there are so many ways we can get all bent out of shape. We can be bent double with guilt and anxiety, fears and worries, burdens and responsibilities. Let me tell you what I mean.

First, we can get bent out of shape as families. Have you ever seen a family bent out of shape? Actually I went through it myself about 33 years ago. Divorce, blended family. A very difficult and very sad situation. There was anger among family members—family members that could barely tolerate each other—if at all. I'm happy to report that most of it has healed—but it took a long time.

I often get to watch family get bent out of shape over money. I'm privileged to walk with family when a family member dies. But when inheritance comes into question, and money is involved—even a small amount—well, it gets ugly. It tears the family up.

A couple of years ago I was asked to participate in a wedding out of town in a large beautiful Episcopal Church. The priest was very nice, and welcomed me warmly and graciously. He was an outstanding young man-bright, articulate, committed—with a lovely wife and two young children. I arrived for the wedding very early, so we had an opportunity to talk together, and he told me his story. He had not always been an Episcopalian. Actually, he had grown up in another religion, another faith altogether. But then he went to college he had a dramatic conversion experience--an experience so powerful that he not only became a Christian, but he also felt the call to become an Episcopal priest.

However, when he went home, and told his parents, they kicked him out of the house. They purged the house of all his personal belongings. They tore all his pictures out of the photo albums. His father said, “You are dead to us!” All this happened many years before, but to that very day, his father and mother, his sisters and brothers, refused to speak to him. Now he had children of his own and they never saw their grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins. Isn't that sad? Just think what those grandparents are missing!

If Jesus could speak to families that get all bent out of shape like that, I think he would say, “Straighten up! Stand tall! You've hurt long enough! Rise above it!”

Secondly, we can get bent out of shape as people. I've already been talking about family life, but sometimes our own private lives can bend us out of shape.

Let's face it, life is difficult. Life gives us heavy burdens and difficult problems—relationship issues, financial concerns, medical problems. Life can twist and batter us. Life can take the wind out of our sails. But faith in God, faith in Christ, can enable us to stand tall. Faith in Christ can give us the spiritual backbone to stand firm when times are tough. Faith in Christ can give us the confidence and strength. Faith reminds us that we do not face our problems by ourselves. The Apostle Peter said, “Cast all your cares on God, for He cares for you.” (I Peter 5:7). And our Lord Jesus said, Come unto me, all of you with heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28).

When we feel all bent out of shape, when we feel pressed down and burdened, when we feel bent double, Jesus says the same thing to us that he said to that crooked woman 2000+ years ago: “Straighten up! Rise above it! I will be your strength! I will help you. I will hold you up. I will stand with you.”

Lastly, we can get bent out of shape as a nation. I honestly think that right now we are bent out of shape as a country. The political situation is unbelievable serious—I actually I wish it was a joke and not true.

In my opinion, America is the greatest nation on the face of the earth, the greatest nation in all history, but we are in trouble right now—trouble like we have never faced before—and some of it is bending us to the breaking point. Now, I know there's always been political criticism and arguing—but it's at a new low these days.

Besides political things (I'm not going there!), I need to mention the violence. On Friday I was on the internet, and I came across a link to a video that told me how to survive a mass shooting. Seriously?! It was there because, they said, a mass shooting can happen anywhere—schools, churches, synagogues, shopping malls, movie theaters. And, of course, we know it's not just in the USA but all over the world.

People die and we feel scared, we feel physically sickened. We care. And Jesus cries. I thought about the Gospel account of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. Think about it: Jesus crying, sobbing over what he knew was going to happen to his city and to his people. Jesus wept and said, “Would that you, even you had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.” (Luke 19:42).

After that last synagogue shooting, I prayed, “O God, show us the things that make for peace!” Can you hear Jesus weeping for the victims of these senseless murders?

I think we all want a word from the Lord on how to achieve peace. But the truth is, as a country, we cannot agree on what it will take to achieve peace among us and keep innocent people from dying. Social media is exploding with people arguing about how to prevent the carnage that is becoming so commonplace throughout America—and the world.

I'm pretty sure we all have ideas—different ones—on what makes for safety and peace. More gun control—or less. What to do for mentally ill people. What to do for people of radical religions.

I'm not going to wade into those waters. But I want to look at some of the things we can agree on:

- That violence as a means of venting frustration is wrong (and that includes road rage and domestic violence).
- That verbal violence sets a bad example and leads us down wrong paths.
- That lack of respect for people in general—whether because of political affiliation, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, religion—lack of respect often leads to harm and violence.
- That hate is a negative and harmful emotion. Nothing good can come of it.

Ageed and remember that Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you maybe called children of your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:43-45a).

Can we also agree:

- To monitor our own conversation so that only gracious kind words come out of our mouths?
- That we can live as people of peace, renouncing verbal and physical violence and instead doing random acts of kindness?
- To let God be the judge of other people and stop presuming we know the mind and heart of God?
- That we will stand tall and tell people that we will not tolerate hateful speech on any matter?
- To work together with people who may hold opinions and positions that are quite different from our own?

This morning—right here—in some way—great or small—let us agree to change. Change begins one person at a time. Let's each be the change we need in this country. Let's stop doing whatever might be hurtful and start doing whatever is healing.

Let's do it now.

Let's be agents of change to unbend our nation. Jesus is there for us, with his special brand of healing. More than ever, we need the words of Jesus to show us again how to be the people God expects us to be.

Besides changing our actions and words, let us all hope that it spreads! The writer of Lamentation wrote this thousands of years ago: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” (Lamentations 3:22-24).

Prayer List: *Connie, Virginia, Jim, George, Betty, Beverly, Peggy, Dottie, Jack, Paul, Jennifer, Fred, Barbara, Judy, Donna, Renee, Marie, Maria, Alfie, Diana, Clair, Scott, Coreen, Doug, Dorrie, Monica, Larry, Charlene, Chris, Nancy, Ted, Charley, Shannon, Rita, James and Michele*