

WGUMC August 25, 2019 “Horizons of Hope”
Luke 13:10-17

I had a t-shirt idea. I wanted to create one of those silhouettes of human evolution that starts with a great ape, then is followed by *homo habilis* and *homo erectus* until we get to *homo sapien*. But then I wanted to show how we are currently undergoing a process of devolution as we become *homo cell phone*. A quick internet search yesterday proved that my idea was not all that original.

As you walk down the street these days, the humans you pass by all seemed to be bent over a cell phone. They bump into people. They trip over curbs. We’re afraid they will walk into moving cars or fall down stairs. And there’s a life lesson there. The fact of the matter is that when you spend so much time bent over looking down, you don’t even know what you are missing by never looking up.

There were no cell phones in the Bible, but we do have a story about a hunched-over woman. The story begins with the words: “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.”

This is the setting for several of the healings that happen in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus seems to be saying that sabbath is not just a time for worship and prayer. It is a time for healing. I want to take that idea even further to say that if there is no healing, it isn't really sabbath. Every time we come to Sunday worship, that should be the question, shouldn't it? Did any healing happen here today? I'm no miracle worker, but I worship a God who is. What would it take for all of us to come to worship on a Sunday expecting to be healed?

I'm not sure what the hunched-over woman in Luke was expecting. But something got her to the synagogue that day even though it wasn't easy for her to get around. Her problem was that she couldn't stand up straight. The text says that she had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.

Now I don't believe that an evil spirit caused her disability, but I can tell you that physical disabilities can drag us down, and the pain and the frustration of dealing with them every single day can produce in us a mentally and spiritually-crippling spirit. What is true

of physical disabilities is also true of chronic illnesses, addictions, traumatic life experiences and relationship problems. Whatever gives us any kind of pain over a long enough period of time is going to have a crippling effect on our spirits.

There even comes a point when we no longer remember what it was like to be free of our ailment. We get so accustomed to our illness that we let it define us. It imposes a certain order on our lives, our diets and daily routines. It limits our options. It narrows our horizons.

The woman who came to Jesus in the synagogue on the sabbath couldn't stand up straight, which means that she spent a lot of her life looking down at the ground instead of up at the sky. She could only see her feet in the dirt and she never felt like her head was in the clouds. We know what that feels like. We've been there.

So she came into the synagogue, but she didn't go up to Jesus and demand to be healed, as so many others did. She never asked

for healing. Like those who have lost hope, perhaps she couldn't form the words or even the idea in her mind that she could be set free. Nevertheless, something compelled her to show up and it wasn't the spirit that had been crippling her for eighteen years. It was the Holy Spirit, God's holy healing energy that is always ready to exploit any and every healing opportunity.

But she was still in the grip of that crippling spirit, so she hung back until Jesus saw her and called her over. Without waiting for her to speak, without laying a finger on her, Jesus told her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Here is yet another woman in the Bible with no name. Today, we commonly refer to her as "the bent-over woman," because we not only let disease define us but that is how we define everyone around us.

In Kaleidoscope last week, someone noticed that Jesus told the woman that she was free even before he laid hands on her, before he healed her, before she stood up straight. Could that be because he knew that he had to free her mind before he could free her body?

He had to cast off that crippling spirit that had let her disability do so much damage to her sense of self. First she had to be set free from the lies that told her that there was no wholeness in her and that there could be no healing for her. At some point in our lives, haven't we believed those lies? We all have to be mentally and spiritually ready to be physically healed.

Only when Jesus cast out that evil spirit could the woman utilize the power of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus laid hands on her he confirmed the wholeness and the blessedness that was already inside her. The holy, healing energy that had been locked up for so long was finally set loose so that she could be set free.

And immediately, she stood up and began to praise God. Suddenly, she had a new spirit in her, and Jesus gave her a new identity. He told the scolds in the synagogue that this wasn't any nameless woman. This was a daughter of Abraham, much more precious than any ox or donkey that they would gladly untie from the manger and lead to water on the sabbath day. Jesus had

unchained her from her crippling spirit and led her to living water that day. What else could she do but stand up and praise God?

If only every instance of healing were so dramatic, so instantaneous and so complete, but I invite you to put this story in slo-mo, because I think you will see how this is the pattern of our healing no matter how long it takes to happen. First we have to cast out the spirit that tells us that we can't be cured. Then we have to rediscover the wholeness and the capacity for wellness within us.

This morning, I want to share with you a story that Sarah Zwingman shared with me. Some of you have never met Sarah, but you know that we've been praying for her for the last couple of years, ever since she was diagnosed with PSC or Primary sclerosing cholangitis, a progressive liver disease. There is no cure. She may eventually have to have a liver transplant, and even then, the disease could come back. On top of that, she is dealing with several other autoimmune diseases: Type 1 diabetes, celiac disease,

hyperthyroidism, and ulcerative colitis. And she has a husband, Tom, and two young children, Emma and Alex.

No one but God knows how Sarah has managed to get through these past couple of years. There was a period of time when she was in and out of the hospital every few weeks. She was on antibiotics for recurring infections and taking pain meds all the time. She quit her job as a school teacher. A lot of folks in her situation would want to quit life.

Not Sarah. She has an amazing attitude, though even she admits that the burden of her body was starting to wear her down. It was affecting her mental health and her relationships. You could say that she was becoming that bent-over woman who could see only the dirt and never the sky.

But the Holy Spirit did not let that happen. One day, a voice inside of her head said, “You can be set free from your ailment.” Invisible hands laid on her heart to confirm: “You are a daughter of

Abraham, my beloved child. You have a purpose to fulfill. You have a life to live.”

I believe that it was the Spirit of God that prompted Sarah to ask herself, “What do I want out of my life?” She thought about it and realized that what she really wanted was to make memories with her family. She wanted to travel the world. And she wanted to live her life in service to others. But she had all these obstacles in the way, and she was going to have to figure out how she could overcome them or at least outsmart them. So she took the time to write a personal mission statement as a way of keeping her head up, so to speak, focused on the horizon of hope in the distance rather than the dirt at her feet. Yesterday, this is what she wrote to me: “I feel so awakened and I know all of this is only possible through God. He has led me to the right people at the right time. He has prepared my mind, heart and body. And I started doing the hard work...the head work (mental health), and the heart work (emotional health) to get my physical health back!”

Sarah is doing so much better now, and she is rejoicing because she is experiencing some blessed freedom from the crippling spirit of these chronic conditions. Oh, the obstacles are still there, may always be there, but today they are just that, just obstacles on the way to God's promise of a fuller, healthier, happier life. As her faith family, we can be a part of the crowd rejoicing for all the wonderful things God is doing!

I called this sermon "Horizons of Hope," because there isn't just one avenue for healing. There isn't just one cure for chronic ailments. And your cure may not be what you are currently looking for. Sarah reminds us that the Holy Spirit can heal us in all kinds of ways and open up for us all kinds of options. In each of our lives, hope has more than one horizon. We just have to figure out what is our mission. What are we here for? What do we want to live for? And even if the worst were to happen, if all our dreams were dashed, there is still one last and final hope for every Christian; there is the hope of resurrection.

I could stop there, but this week, it's important for me to mention that the healing that can happen for individuals can happen for families, communities, even countries. We have just marked the 400th anniversary of the start of the slave trade in this country, and there are millions of people who are still bent-over by the crippling spirit of slavery and its awful legacy. It's as if there is still a virus lurking in their bodies ever ready to break out again.

There are so many obstacles in the path to racial healing, but there are just as many ways that we can help make that healing happen. The much needed break in this fever of hate and racism and cruelty and ugliness that we are experiencing in our country right now is coming in the honest conversations we are having, the history we are learning, and the truth that we are facing, that we must face, in order to be set free from America's most deadly disease.

Don't let anyone tell you that it is incurable. Take it from generations of African Americans who knew that even if they

couldn't see the hope, they could sing it. So I leave you with the first verse of a song written in 1900 by James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was a writer, poet, college professor, the first African American to be admitted to the Florida Bar since Reconstruction and who served as a foreign diplomat in Teddy Roosevelt's administration. Though he could have spent his days bent over by the legacy of slavery, by Jim Crow and the lynchings and the cross burnings and the countless daily indignities, he had faith and believed that God had the power to set him and all of his people free from the crippling spirit of our national sickness, so he kept his eyes on the horizon of hope and wrote this poem to celebrate Abraham Lincoln's birthday:

Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
ring with the harmonies of liberty;
let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
let us march on till victory is won.