



“Stand Up Straight”
13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 22, 2010

Prayer: Bless the Lord, o my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. –Psalm 103:1

Of all the stories in the Bible, I would have to say the story of the Woman Standing Tall is one of my favorite stories. One reason this story is my favorite is it reminds me of my grandmother.

Grandma was short. There were no two ways about it. Now to a fourth or fifth grader, being taller than an adult is a pretty cool thing. It means being able to look an adult – someone older than you in the eye. It means being able to see over them if they are standing in front of you. Being tall means people can see you without having to look down, that people need to look up to you.

I took great delight in being taller than my grandmother. In fact, I reminded her every opportunity I had that I was taller than she was, especially when she would give me a hug. “Look Grandma!” I exclaimed, my chin inches above her shoulder, “I’m taller than you!”

One day Grandma had had enough. Stretching herself as tall as she could, she responded back, “No you’re not, young lady! My bones just shrunk!” That was the last time I ever teased her about being shorter than me.

The second reason this story is one of my favorites is I love how Jesus challenges the assumptions of the leader of the synagogue. Luke tells us the woman began to praise God after she had been healed. The woman’s praise is a natural response. Eighteen years, after all, is a long time to live life looking at others in such a way they can truly see you. Eighteen years is a long time to see the feet of others, or where the rocks are in the road and not the trees overhead or the blue sky. The woman’s praise is out of joy. Her life has been radically changed – for the better. No longer is she bent, but she can stand tall.

The leader does not see reason for the woman’s praise. The leader does not go after the woman, telling her to be quiet, that even praise itself can be an act of work on the Sabbath. Rather, the leader of the synagogue goes after Jesus. “How dare you???” He asks Jesus. “How dare you heal on the Sabbath? Do you not know the Sabbath is a day of rest? What right do you have to heal this woman?”

It is not the reaction of the synagogue leader that I love. Rather, I love the reality Jesus does not go turn around and leave. Instead, Jesus goes toe to toe with the leader of the synagogue. Jesus challenges the understanding of the Sabbath, reminding those who hear this exchange that even leading one’s animal away from the manger was a source of work.

Religious leaders in Jesus' time had turned the keeping of the Sabbath into a day that had more legal implications to it than it did religious. There were extremely narrow definitions of what could or could not be done on the Sabbath. In some of the research I have read, even coming to the synagogue beyond a particular distance was viewed as work. A way of getting around this was for the religious leaders to have their house, or their tent built on the steps of the synagogue. That way, they would have a short walk to the synagogue, and it would not be viewed as work. It would be the equivalent of my camping out in front of Mt. Eden – it would look a little silly!

Luke and our other readings for today remind us of what is truly important: to take time for rest, reflection, and nourishment in God's Word. "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" the third commandment reads. This is a reminder that we as twenty-first century Christians need even today.

Recently, I received a newsletter from the American Lutheran Publication Bureau. In this particular issue, it referenced "silly resolutions" it had heard of. These "silly resolutions" were resolutions that had been passed at recent synod assemblies that left one to wonder what the synod was thinking of when these resolutions were passed.

One synod passed a resolution that called on the National Football League to push the starting time of football games away from 2 p.m. The argument was that a 2 p.m. start time conflicted with later worship services or ministry in the afternoons because people wanted to watch the game. The editors of the American Lutheran Publication Bureau reminded its readers that not all football games are played in Eastern or Daylight Savings Time Zones; some are played within the Pacific Time Zone!

Another synod passed a resolution directed toward the school districts within the synod. The resolution was for student athletic events not to be held on Sunday afternoons. The argument behind the resolution is with Sunday being a day of rest, students needed time with their families.

After writing about both resolutions, the editors of the American Lutheran Publication Bureau wryly commented that perhaps meeting with local school districts regarding the scheduling of events on a Sunday afternoon would have a better outcome than talking with representatives from the National Football League!

Yet both resolutions leave me wondering about whether or not we as Christians have forgotten what it means to have a day of rest, to truly take time to sit and reflect in God's Word. Our society encourages productivity. In these economic times, working harder can also provide and mean a certain sense of job security. Working hard can leave little time for rest. Jesus' rebuke to the leader of the synagogue reminds us of the importance of rest rather than running ourselves ragged.

This is the third reason I love today's text. The bent over woman does not remain bent over in tiredness and exhaustion. Instead, Jesus gives her a name – an identity – calling her 'daughter of Abraham'. The woman did not seek Jesus out for healing. Jesus sought her out. In the same way, Jesus seeks each and every one of us out. Jesus seeks us from under the burdens that keep us bent over, from the worries we carry as though they were the weight of the entire world. Jesus speaks the same words to us that he spoke to the bent over woman, "My Beloved, My Precious Child, You are set free!"

Like the woman, no longer are we bent over. We stand straight with our arms reaching to heaven, praising and thanking God for setting us free.