

Proper 16C – The Bent-over Woman
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St. John's Episcopal Church
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When I met Gail, we were both 26 years old with medium length blond hair. Some people could have mistaken us for sisters.

But our life circumstances could hardly have been more different.

I met Gail when she came into my office for help – for food and financial assistance for herself and her children.

I was working then at Central Presbyterian church in Atlanta, GA – a large, downtown church across from the state capitol.

Gail lived in a nearby housing project. Over time, she and I became friends. She would come in the office from time to time just to talk, and I learned about her life. I stayed in touch with her when I left Central Pres. to start seminary at Emory – and after that for a few years.

Gail had an amazing spirit and a great sense of humor, but she was bent over by life's circumstances. During the years I knew her, Gail tried over and over to stand up straight – to get an education, to rise up out of poverty - but time and time again she would be bent over by her history of abuse, the realities of poverty, addiction, and the systems that kept poor people poor.

Every time she tried to go back to school, something happened to prevent it. She got a loan for school – but lost her food stamps because of it.

She was unable to feed herself and her children – so she had to give up the loan and the dream of school.

Later, she became pregnant again – and for a time she was homeless.

After a few years, I lost contact with her, and she with me.

I remembered Gail this week when I read the Gospel story of the bent-over-woman.

It is not only poverty, abuse and addiction that can keep us bent-over, unable to hold onto hope....

Maybe it is physical health.

Perhaps an old hurt that continues to cause pain?

Perhaps it is a grudge that we hold onto – a grudge that holds onto us so tightly that it crowds out room for other things in our life.

Luke's story of this unnamed woman – the “bent-over woman” as she is sometimes called, is a story of healing and hope.

If this is a new story to you, it may be because it is fairly new to the Sunday lectionary readings for the Episcopal church. Several years ago we switched to the New Revised Common Lectionary, which is more inclusive than the old Episcopal lectionary – includes more stories of women!

The “bent-over” woman was in the worshipping congregation of the synagogue that day, when Jesus saw her.

She was bound by her ailment into a painful posture.

We don't know what it was – a birth defect – an injury – severe arthritis.

We do know that it made her life extremely difficult.

Her eyes and head were fixed, immovable, cast down, so that it was impossible for her to look anyone in the eye.

She must have felt isolated, perhaps even cursed.

Many of the people of that time thought that physical and mental illness was a sign that the person had committed a terrible sin.

Imagine living for 18 years with that sort of condition!

Jesus saw her, called to her, and healed her.

He set her free from her bondage, and she stood up straight and praised God.

There are many kinds of bondage, and there is much need for healing of all kinds
Individuals and systems are in need of healing.

This week I learned that West Virginia is “America’s Most Medicated State”.

According to a recent study, West Virginia has had the highest prescription drug use of all states for the past two years.

This reflects the high rates of diabetes, asthma, obesity, and other chronic conditions among our people.

12% of adults here have diabetes
more than 68% are overweight or obese
27% smoke
30% report poor mental health
and 20% have some sort of disability.

WV is well above the national average for deaths from heart disease.

Although some of these conditions are inherited, many of them are caused or made worse by people’s lifestyles and habits.

Many people cannot afford or do not have access to enough fresh, healthy foods.

Most of us do not get enough exercise to remain healthy.

The stress of modern life takes its toll on us.

Where is the healing – where is the release from this bondage of ill health?
Jesus healed the “bent-over” woman on the Sabbath – against the rulers’ wishes. He cut through the false peace of “the way things always are” by performing a public healing on the Sabbath, in the middle of the worship.

Perhaps some sort of revolution is necessary for West Virginia to turn the tide of chronic illness. We can't just keep on going the way things are now. Perhaps we can work for a grocery store on the East End, where a large percentage of the population does not have a car. Perhaps we can support sidewalks and parks and safe places for children to play. Perhaps we can support each other as we work to improve our own individual health.

God wants us all to be freed from our bondage. And although we know that physical healing does not always happen, however much we pray for it, God wants healing and wholeness for us all. God can heal all of our hearts.