

SERMON for Sunday, August 26, 2007
 Luke 13:10-17

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Whatever...

Yeah, whatever... how many times do you have to hear that before you want to grit your teeth and want to scream in frustration? *Whatever* has become standard in our common language, a response with many meanings. *Whatever...I don't care. I give up. It doesn't make any difference, You don't make a difference. Whatever...* keeps us at a safe distance, from a situation, from a decision, from a position, from another person. *Whatever...we say. Whatever...you want to do, say, believe, however you want to act, whoever you want to ignore, is all right with me. Whatever...*

Jesus was preaching in a synagogue, the press of people all around, interested religious leaders, curious onlookers, hostile politicians, desperate seekers. It was the Sabbath day, a time according to tradition when all work would stop, all chores would be put off, all ordinary tasks ignored to follow the *Torah*, the laws given in ancient times. The laws were strict, with many *shoulds* and *oughts* and *thou shalt*s and *thou shalt not*s. It was rather a tricky path to follow, to follow the way and be observant. Of course, there were a variety of approaches to faithfulness, then as now. As Jesus was teaching and preaching, his attention was caught by a woman, an old, bent over woman, who, according to the storyteller, bent over for eighteen years. That was a long time to see only the ground as you made your way around your city, your home, your church. Jesus, seeing her, had compassion. He called her over, laid his hands on her, she was able to stand up straight and see the world in a new way. She was able to look Jesus directly in the face, and thank God. Not everyone was praising God that day. The leaders of the synagogue took exception to Jesus, exception to, as they saw it, his rather loose interpretation of the code of conduct that regulated Jewish faithfulness. Jesus has cured someone on the Sabbath, on the day of rest, when no work should be done! *She should come back another day*, the leader says. That is the law. But here is the gospel: *the kingdom cannot wait*, Jesus replies.

A common sight in the mountains of Ethiopia, surrounding the capital city of Addis Ababa, are women and girls carrying seventy-five pound bundles of firewood on their backs. Bent over and barefoot, the women carry the seven-foot wide bundles of eucalyptus saplings from elevations of 11,000 feet down to the city center at 7,000 feet. There they sell the firewood for a few pennies. In thinking of these Ethiopian women and girls while reflecting on today's gospel woman, theologian Dan Clendenin says, *I suspect her condition reflected the complex interplay of vicious causes and consequences – medical infirmity, community indifference, social marginalization, economic subsistence...* When Jesus touches the life of the bent over woman, he is touching more than her body. He healed her spirit, according to Luke, the spirit that crippled her. Can we read her story without thinking of all the women and girls in many parts of the world today who are bent over? The carriers of firewood in Ethiopia, or those who sew the world's fashion clothing, or those who pick vegetables, or those whose bodies are mutilated? And, of course, not just bent-over women, but men as well, men and women and children who are imprisoned, victims of AIDS, those without adequate health care or fresh water or opportunity to earn a living. *The kingdom cannot wait...*

The leader of the synagogue, we read, was fighting mad at Jesus. The rule was broken, the edges blurred, the lines of acceptable religious behavior were skewed. And he took his dissatisfaction public, telling the assembled crowd that there was no reason to break the rule, for there were six days when healing could have taken place. Why not wait? Why not wait indeed? Jesus did not have to do what he did when he did. This was more than a personal disagreement. This was more than a simple rebuke. This was more than a single infraction, an honest mistake. The officials both religious and political did not like what they saw and heard in Jesus. All that he said, all that he did, all that he was threatened their kingdoms. You know the list – inviting outcasts to the table, conversing with prostitutes, encouraging the touching of those who might be dirty foreigners, and now healing on the Sabbath. A new day was dawning, a new day that shed light on injustice, that opened the eyes of the blind, that straightened up the bent ones so they could look love in the face.

But this gospel story is not so easy for those of us who hear it today, to simply cheer for Jesus, boo the synagogue leader, and clap for the straightened woman. Well, we can do those things, but there is a bit more to it all. First of all is the issue of our Biblical literacy, the way in which we read and use the Bible. Do we see it as a literal document, which draws a precise picture of the world in every way, scientific, past and future, human behavior and divine command? Do we use the Bible as an ancient google.com, an encyclopedic reference book for tips and principles on daily living? Do we learn the Bible as the story of God's unfolding love, the creation of all that was and is and is to come, the continuing presence of God's grace? At the National Assembly of the Lutheran church in Chicago a few weeks ago, it was overwhelmingly passed that we Lutherans would focus on studying the Bible over the next two years. That was an easy one, you might say, hardly controversial, hardly newsworthy, hardly a change from what we have been doing all along. We have strayed a bit, and let the study of Scripture slip away from us, let it become just one of many things competing for our attention. Our Sunday School children have about 50 minutes weekly to learn the stories of faith. If they come every week, they have about 28 hours a year. We would be outraged if our public schools, our gymnastics classes, our soccer clinics, camps, and coaches required so little to teach skills and strategies and how to be a part of a team. We adults don't do much better, and we leave the Bible learning to a hearing a lesson on Sunday and perhaps picking up an occasional magazine or book, engaging in monthly circle study. I am not trying to scold – that won't get us very far – but how will we know the why and how, the urgency and absolute importance of the kingdom if we don't know God's story? How will we see that Jesus had no choice but to break the Sabbath rule?

Bondage is a second issue of the gospel for today. A local Madison woman has written a number of novels based on her love for quilting. Perhaps some of you, women in particular, have read Jennifer Chiaverini's series on the *Elm Creek Quilts*. As she writes about quilting and quilt patterns, she pieces together the story of slavery in the earlier days of the United States and how quilts played an important part of the Underground Railroad. Certain patterns and colors in quilts would indicate safe houses and passage to those runaway slaves heading for freedom and those who were assisting them, quilts that would trumpet their message as they were hung on clotheslines and porch railings. The books are simple to read, but as I became engrossed in the Underground Railroad I realized once again that slavery is not an issue that is over. So many ways people are bound, by the color of skin, by the country of origin, by language facility, by access to jobs and education and public transportation, by affordable housing. And it is not just *them*, but *us*. We too are bound by our habits, by our rituals, by our pasts. Our vision is sometimes narrowed

by the rules with which we govern our lives, by what we have decided is acceptable. Our ears are closed by old patterns and leftover emotions, by anger and resentment and frustration. We are bound, we are bent over. Does it keep us from praising God for the miracles in our midst? I wouldn't doubt that some of us might have found ourselves cheering on the synagogue leader for keeping order, and grumbled at Jesus for changing our habits, and our lives.

E. Stanley Jones was a Methodist evangelist in the first half of the twentieth century, spending much of his time in India. He lectured on interfaith issues to the educated classes, he was a confidante and friend to Mahatma Ghandi and to the Nehru family. He wrote many books of daily meditations, many of which concluded with a phrase and inspiration for daily living, including this: *Religion that doesn't begin with the individual, doesn't begin. Religion that ends with the individual, ends.* When Jesus touched the bent over woman, she was the only one on whom he had his eyes. Her spirit was the one that needed to be lifted. He only paid attention to this child of God, this daughter of Abraham. Was that it? No. His touch reverberated through the crowd, who although they understood the objection of the synagogue leader, knew that a new day had dawned. Not just one woman was changed. Many were straightened, many freed. The healing did not end with her, for the ancient rules were broken and the new reign of God's kingdom came just a little bit closer that day. And where do we fit into this story?

*Whatever...*With tragedy that flashes before us so completely and constantly and instantly on the screen, in words and pictures, we are so quickly desensitized. We simply cannot take in the passing parade of human need that passes by. Bent over women, starving children of Darfur forced to become adults for smaller children without parents, burdened residents of New Orleans and Mississippi and now of Minnesota and Wisconsin and Illinois and Ohio, wrecked and shattered American and Iraqi soldiers and wrecked and shattered mothers and fathers of those that won't come home. Too many individuals. And so, *whatever...*Jesus turns that *whatever* in a **WHATEVER**, whatever it takes to straighten up the woman, to straighten us up, to breathe new and life-giving spirit into tired and worn-out souls, to bring justice and healing and God's kingdom of peace to every corner of the world. **WHATEVER** love needs, whatever compassion calls us to do, whatever the sacrifice...

This gospel story in Luke today is summed up: *whatever...*or **WHATEVER!** Amen.