

Season after Pentecost [Proper 23B]

October 14, 2018

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Psalm 8; Mark 10: 17-31

“Stand Up Straight”

In the novel *The Ugly American*, an American engineer named Homer and his wife Emma, live in the remote village of Chang Dong. They do their best to learn the language, respect the culture and to live as their hosts do. Emma soon notices that all the older people in the village are bent over, and walk as if their backs hurt all the time. “That’s the natural thing that happens to older people,” she is told, but this answer does not satisfy her.

So she watches and soon realizes that the elderly people in the village, those who are too old to work in the rice fields, all have the jobs of sweeping – their homes, the paths leading from their homes to the road, and finally the road itself. They use brooms made of palm fronds, with handles only two feet long – handles that require them to bend over when they sweep. When Emma asks why they use these brooms, the reply is that this is how brooms have always been made, and that even if wood for longer handles were available it would be too expensive to use.

On a drive in the country, Emma notices a reed growing along the road similar to the reeds her villagers use to make brooms. But this reed has a stalk that is five feet long. She quickly stops and digs up some of the reeds, then plants them outside her home. One day Emma cuts one of the reeds, binds its fronds and begins to sweep outside her home. “Look, she sweeps with her back straight,” a neighbor says. “I have never seen such a thing. “Over the next few days, crowds gather to watch Emma sweep. Finally, an elderly man asks where he, too, might get such a broom. Soon a group goes to gather enough reeds to grow for the entire village.

Four years later, when Emma is back in the United States, she receives a letter from the headman of Chang Dong. “I am writing to thank you for a thing you did for the old people of Chang Dong,” the letter says. “For many centuries, we had always had old people with bent backs in this village. We had always thought that this was part of growing old, and it was one of the reasons we dreaded old age. But with your long-handled brooms you showed us a new way to sweep. It is a small thing, but it has changed the lives of our old people. “You will be happy to know that now there are few bent backs in the village of Chang Dong. Today the backs of our old people are straight and firm. No longer are their bodies painful. That is a small thing, I know, but for our people it is an important thing.”

“Perhaps you will be pleased to know that on the outskirts of the village we have constructed a shrine in your memory. It is a simple affair; at the foot of the altar are these words: ‘In memory of the woman who unbent the backs of our people.’”¹

It could be said that among the reasons Jesus came to be among us was to unbend the backs of all people. Like this wealthy man who seeks out Jesus to ask, “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” It seems to be an earnest, almost urgent question. When Jesus asks if he has lived according to the commandments, the man says, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth. “Did he really believe he had never faltered in his obedience to the law despite the impossibility of such a feat? Was he dead serious and sincere or arrogant and delusional? We don’t know. What we do know is that Jesus looked at this man and loved him. It says that, right there in the Bible, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him.” So hear that love when Jesus says, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Right then, we discover this wealthy man’s back is bent.

In the Revised Standard Version of the Bible it says, “[After Jesus spoke, the man’s] countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.” “His countenance fell.” His facial expression fell and with it, his whole posture. “After this conversation with Jesus, the same Jesus who loved him, the man felt not exhilaration, joy, or peace. His countenance fell.”² Can’t you see it? His shoulders slumped, his neck and head turned toward the ground as he walked away in sorrow, disappointment, grief. “This is the only place in the gospel where someone is directly invited to come with Jesus, and he walks away, refusing to be a disciple — and reason was money. We are likely to sympathize with this man. After all, compared to the vast majority of people in the world, we are indeed people of many possessions. Sell everything and give it to the poor and join the unpredictable venture of following Jesus? It seems Jesus is asking a lot.

But maybe what we do not notice, that Jesus who loved him did, was that the man’s body and spirit were already bent under the weight of his many possessions, bent under the burden of trying to do, be, to own enough to have control, win God’s approval and eternal life. If that is the case, Jesus’s directive was not an ultimatum or test but an invitation to be relieved and free of what weighs him down, what imprisons him, whatever limits his view of God, others and his life. Did Jesus give him a burdensome command or a gracious invitation? Jesus, the one who unbent backs, “was showing the man a different path to walk in life, one in which he could stand up straight and not be stooped over with the heavy burden of”³ never be satisfied, never feeling there was enough even though he

had plenty, never knowing contentment rather than anxiety of continually protecting what he has and needing more.

Do we have our possessions or do our possessions have us? Do we have our cell phones or do our cell phones have us? Do we use social media or does it use us? Do we have desires and ambitions or do they have us? Do we have a house or car or does the cost of that dream house or car have us? Jesus tells us to let go of whatever is bending our backs and limiting our freedom to serve him. Let go of whatever is getting in the way of the adventure of following Jesus and living in the freedom of God's love, promises and purpose.

Jesus has me thinking, my brothers and sister. What keeps me bent, looking at the ground rather than standing straight and looking at what God makes possible? Maybe you are wondering, too. What have I put between Jesus and me, between me and my neighbor, between me and the ways God could use me to bring grace and good news to the world? What has bent your life, my life or distorted our vision so that we, too, walk away from Jesus with a fallen countenance and a restless, bent life?

We gather today in honor of the Jesus who unbent the backs of our people. "We come to the altar at communion. You may hear, 'body of Christ given for you,' but under those words hear Jesus saying, 'you are set free. Straighten you back. Arise and live.'" The grace and love of God free us so that we can follow Jesus in setting others free. We are freed to free. Blessed to be a blessing. Unbent so we can see into the eyes of our neighbor and reach out with the unencumbered hands of God's love.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem where he himself will be bent over, receiving the lashes on his back, carrying his own cross through streets.⁴ But in three days the at an empty tomb we learn Jesus had been freed from death and Jesus stood up straight again and forever. Jesus came, lived, died and rose that we might be freed from the things that would cripple us, that could keep us bent over with blind ambition, shameless materialism, or the fear of living the freed life of a disciple. Jesus came that we might hear our call to stretch up and out, to grow in grace, to stand up straight, and help free others in the name of the One who has unbent the backs of all people, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri

ENDNOTES

1. Noted in sources including Lance Webb's God's Surprises (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976) and King Duncan's sermon "Straight Backs and Rekindled Dreams" Collected Sermons, Dynamic Preaching, 20005, 0-000-0000-20 www.esermon.com

2. William H. Willimon, "Standing up Straight" Pulpit Resource October 15, 2000 pg.12

3. Ibid. Pg. 13

4. I thank Thomas A Renquist for this image. "The Bent Made Straight" from the book Topsy-Turvey: Living in the Biblical World www.store.sermonsuite.com