

Bent Into Shape

August 21, 2022

Bent Out Of Shape

As I read this week's Gospel, the story of the woman who was bent over for 18 years who Jesus heals on the sabbath, my mind first goes to things that get bent out of shape. Do any of you remember stretching the phone cord in order to get privacy? When I was growing up, we had one phone on the first floor of the house, and so if you wanted any privacy when you were on the phone, you had to stretch the cord from the wall in the kitchen, around the corner, and into the front hall coat closet. By virtue of the fact that there were three teenagers in our house in the 1980s, that phone cord was wildly bent out of shape by the time my folks replaced that phone when I left for college.

Or think of the arms of a sweater. I remember a college roommate doing laundry for the first time. She had borrowed a sweater from someone down the hall, and after laundering it, hung it by its arms to dry. You can imagine her surprise when she went to check on it, and found that the arms were almost double their original length! They, and the person who had lent it to her, were bent out of shape.

When I think of things that have been horribly bent out of shape, I also think of my dad's knees. He had a botched knee surgery in 1958 and walked around on those bad knees for over 50 years. When he finally had knee replacement surgery, he had to do extra physical therapy, not for his knees, but for all of the muscles that had become misshapen in the 50 plus years that were compensating for his bad knees.

Now, while these are trite examples of physical things being bent out of shape, we use that term to talk about our attitudes and mindsets, too, don't we? As we try to understand how Jesus healing the woman who was bent over can be meaningful in our own spiritual lives, I'd like to invite you to reflect on how, over time, YOU have been bent out of shape. The phone cord and my dad's knees AND the woman in our Gospel who was bent over for 18 years encourage us to think not of one-time or short-term experiences that bug us but that we bounce back from, but rather those longer-term experiences that significantly change our shape: Think of how the Great Depression shaped a whole generation's buying, eating, and spending habits.

I have a friend whose mom grew up in the Depression who had a box in her sewing room labeled "string too short to save." And if we can see how the Depression bent people out of shape, we can discern how our lived experiences have bent us, too. Maybe you've gotten bent out of shape by conforming to being the person your family thinks you are/expects you to be. Maybe the coping mechanisms you developed in order to make it through a particularly toxic time bent you out of shape. Or maybe over time the culture at work has contorted you into behaving in a certain way, against your ethics or personality.

As a parent of a toddler, I'm reading so many articles right now that suggest that the ways that we as parents talk to our children shapes how they come to understand themselves. If a person is belittled, demeaned, or even shamed, that shapes their view of themselves and of the world. The words we receive early on – smart or not, fat or healthy, strong-willed or bad – can shape us.

And so, just like when your mom told you that if you spent too much time with your eyes crossed they might stay that way, when we spend too much time contorted, bent and twisted in ways that aren't true to our deepest selves, the likelihood grows that we will stay that way, be it greedy or stingy, believing that might makes right, looking out only for my best interests, rather than living in such a way that demonstrates that we are responsible to and for one another.

There are so many ways that people are bent and misshapen. So often, when people come to me to process their experience after a divorce, they'll talk about how they could no longer try to be someone they were not or the flip side of that, that after a breakup, they realize just how contorted they had been. Our relationships shape us, as do power, titles, shoulds, dissatisfaction with self. Our culture's definition of success bends us out of shape as we seek power and money, or when we seek to be a super-parent with a meaningful career, homemade organic birthday treats, a BMI of 19, and time to read for fun.

In my life, an example of this contortion was when I was working in Catholic churches for a decade and was tasked with teaching, particularly around women's and LGBT issues. Part of why I knew God was calling me out of that realm was that I saw myself being distorted, contorted, becoming bitter as the organization I was working for demanded that I teach their narrow way, when I knew at the core of my being that God's love is expansive and liberating, not coercive and death dealing.

Texts like our Gospel were huge motivators to allow God's grace to re-shape me, and I'm sure that some of you have been thinking about how politics have gotten us so bent out of shape. When greed and what is good for me continually take precedence over mutuality and the common good, our whole beings, bodies, minds, souls, and our society are bound to become contorted.

All of these ways that we contort ourselves shape our perspective, just like that of the woman in our Gospel story today. She was bent over for 18 years. This not only meant she was struggling with physical pain and fatigue, it's inevitable that she was experiencing frustration and isolation and vulnerability as well.

I know when I'm not feeling well – whether physically, mentally, or spiritually – it's hard to be positive, it's hard to be kind, it's hard to see the good around, it's hard to be generous. In short, the more we're contorted and bent out of shape, the harder it is to be Christlike.

The woman we read about in this week's Gospel lesson was bent over for 18 years. Eighteen years! If this helps you gain some perspective, 18 years ago was 2004. Can you imagine what it's been like to be bent over, contorted, have your perspective limited, since 2004? How much has happened in your life since then?

Healing

So if the first aspect of my reflection is to wrap our minds around being bent over, being bent out of shape, both physically and psycho-spiritually, and how being bent out of shape creates disease within us, the second aspect of today's reflection is on healing, and specifically genuine to

this Gospel, healing on the sabbath. Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath. Why didn't he heal her earlier? Or why not the next day? She was bent over. Her affliction was not life threatening. I'd like to suggest that Jesus heals her on the Sabbath because every day of life matters, and one more day bent out of shape is one too many.

Years ago, I visited the Martin Luther King memorial in Atlanta. One thing I was struck by was the story of how many people in King's inner circle, even his father, were resistant to the work he did and the methods he used. Like the leader of the synagogue in today's reading, they said, "Can't you do it in a way that won't upset the apple cart?" Can't you wait until tomorrow? But justice deferred is justice denied.

Now friends, here's a bit of how the Gospels are pure brilliance: while Jesus heals the woman to change HER perspective, he heals on the Sabbath to change the perspective of those around her. It's interesting, in Luke's Gospel, the people who don't think they need healing are the ones who truly suffer. When Jesus heals someone of blindness and others critique, it's those who criticize who are truly blind. Similarly, when Jesus heals someone's paralysis, the onlookers who are upset are those whose spirits are paralysed. And so, in today's Gospel, when the woman who is bent out of shape is healed, the limited, skewed perspective remains in those who are so wedded to the rules that they can't find room for grace.

The leader of the synagogue is about law and order, about keeping the law, and Jesus is about helping us to embody the purpose of the law. In the Old Testament, there are two different rationales for Sabbath: In Exodus, Sabbath is linked to creation; God rested on the seventh day, and therefore we are to as well. In Deuteronomy, Sabbath is linked to liberation and restoration; God delivered the Israelites from captivity in Egypt, and therefore we are never to allow ourselves to fall into captivity again.

Therefore, the dual purposes of Sabbath are creation and liberation. You see, both Jesus and the leader of the synagogue think they're being faithful, but the leader of the synagogue had forgotten what the Sabbath is for. It's not for rigidly making sure we don't work. The purpose of Sabbath is to joyously celebrate that you're a child of God! Furthermore, it's important for us to remember that the law is given to us to help us live well together. In our Gospel, the synagogue leader forgot that the law is meant to create the conditions in which we can help each other flourish.

The leader is not wrong to want Jesus to observe the sabbath. The great Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard talked about how we are each pulled in two directions: toward the "finite" and the "infinite." In the case of this Gospel lesson today, the synagogue leader is so committed to what Kierkegaard would call the infinite, that he's lost sight of the finite. When we lean too far in either direction, we risk living skewed and inauthentic lives.

To be a human is to accept that we are both finite and infinite. Following Jesus constantly invites us toward Christ's new and better way which is about principles and pragmatics, about living what is Godly for me as well as what is Godly for we. This is how today's Gospel and the passage from Isaiah which Shawn read for us today dovetail so well. In it, we're told that as we

reshape the world into more Godly shapes for others, our personal perspective will be divinely transformed as well.

So, now your homework: allow Jesus to reshape you yet again. Take some time in the coming days and weeks to pray about the ways that you have been misshapen, the ways that you have contorted yourself or have allowed yourself to be contorted over the years, and how this has come to limit or skew your perspective. How have you, without even realizing it, allowed misaligned priorities, practices, coping mechanisms, even beliefs, to shape and thus limit your perspective. How have they drawn you away from authenticity?

And since the purpose of the law is our mutual flourishing, you may also pray about how the ways you've been bent out of shape have skewed your perspective away from helping others to be authentic. And then ask how has this limited the action of God's grace in and through your life?

In today's Gospel, Jesus is reaching out, offering all of us better perspective. Today. Not tomorrow. Not when it won't make any waves or when it will be socially acceptable. He's offering to bend you back into shape today, if you're willing to receive it.

Challenge

This Gospel offers us some opportunities: to take Jesus up on the invitation to change, to be restored to a shape that is genuine to who we really are, to be reshaped by grace to be able to stand tall, with creativity, and restoration, and mutual flourishing as our spine, and we're being offered this right here, right now. We're being invited to have the mind in us that is in Jesus, recognizing those who are bent out of shape amongst us, and reaching out to them with a healing hand.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Luke 13:10-17; Isaiah 58:9b-14
August 21, 2022