

Jesus heals a woman on the sabbath, offering her a new beginning for her life. She was bent over and not able to stand up straight. And she had been that way for eighteen years.

The leader of the synagogue isn't happy, he's indignant. He chastised the people, telling them they shouldn't be coming and expecting to be healed on the sabbath, how dare you? Jesus catches the leader in his hypocrisy... The lesson ends by noting that Jesus' opponents were put to shame.

There are some interesting elements in this story... We have a woman not able to stand up straight, the religious leader laying down the law, and shame. I wonder if these elements might be connected.

Bunch of stories today... Personally, this story hits close to home, for me... I've always had a bad back. I was born that way...

I remember a day in Jr High when our gym teacher looked at everyone's backs. He said he needed to know if there were people who shouldn't do certain activities. We were all in drill formation like we were doing exercises. And he went up and down each row looking at our backs. Maybe that sounds a little creepy for some of you, but that's how things were many years ago...

When he got to me, he stopped. He traced my backbone with his finger and then had everyone come over to look at it. He said I had kyphosis. He wasn't being mean; he was just doing his job. And finding someone with a bad back seemed to justify what he was doing.

Now, I had no idea what he was talking about, but I certainly didn't like suddenly having a problem, and then suddenly having everybody in school knowing about it. I remember wishing I could crawl under a table. Ever since then I've always been a little sensitive to people with bad posture.

When ever I see someone walking hunched over or their head down, I wonder about their story. I wonder if there's some shame involved, or heart ache, or if the weight of the world is on their shoulders. Truth is, it could be many things.

In our lesson, it says that the religious leader was put to shame. It feels like a transference. After he was shaming everyone, I wonder if the religious leader caught a little of his own venom. A little like, what goes around comes around.

Another story... And I think I may have told this story before so you might remember it... When I was doing my chaplaincy training, I was asked to talk with

a young gal. She was probably in her late twenties; long hair that didn't look like it had been combed in a long time, dirty glasses that slide down on her nose...

We made small talk for a long while. She asked me lots of questions. I had the sense she was wondering if she could trust me.

After a couple meetings she started opening up; she talked about her step-father; how he had physically and sexually abused her. It was so heart breaking to hear how her life had been ruined. She was dealing with a demon of shame.

I told her I just couldn't imagine the pain and suffering she endured. She also told me about the therapy and support groups. With the help of professionals, she was really trying hard, doing everything she could to make a different life. I gave her so much credit...

Eventually the conversation started to be about religion. I had the feeling she was working up to something. She spoke quite openly about God. When all the abuse started, she explained that she prayed, often. She felt that God was the only person who knew her suffering. Eventually as the abuse continued and became worse, she stated to blame God for all the horrific things she endured.

Then she asked, about that one unforgivable sin-- blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Someone had told her about that verse, and she interpreted it to mean being angry at God, and she was scared. She confessed that she had called God a bad name, in fact many times. Then she looked up at me and asked, "Am I going to hell?" Think about this for awhile... This poor woman was dealing with a demon of shame to begin with, and then religion entered the situation and made it much worse.

This is exactly what's going on in our gospel lesson, we have a woman who can't stand up straight, Jesus heals her, and immediately the leader of the synagogue starts barking at the people. Telling them not come here looking for healing.

Religion can be the most wonderful thing in the world, and at the same time religion can also do terrible, horrendous, even abusive things. This is what Jesus is facing.

Too much law and not enough grace binds people with all kinds of guilt and shame and we might as well put the weight of the whole world on their shoulders. God is not about binding people up; God is about freeing people up. God is not about destroying life; God is about abundant life. And let's be honest, sometimes religion gets this wrong...

Now, back to the story, imagine being there with this young woman, how would you respond? What would Jesus do? What would be the life-giving thing to say? I claimed that nothing was impossible for God, and that the God I believed in forgives all things, unconditionally-- even when we are angry at Him.

I also said that God was love. And that God loved her.

We spent some quiet time together. I offered to pray, and during the prayer she started weeping and crying, she dared to imagine God's love and forgiveness. And from the depth of my heart I could sense that she was experiencing forgiveness. And the demon of guilt and shame seemed to weaken-- lessen its hold.

She started whimpering, then crying, and sobbing... Her body was convulsing. A nurse stopped in, wondering what was going on. She looked at me in a puzzled way, I shrugged and she left...

This young woman dared to imagine the grace and love of God. And it changed everything. It was the beginning of a whole new relationship for her with God.

And again, this is not hocus-pocus religion, this is real and genuine! Healing happens when we live into God's abundant love and grace.

And we must always remember to keep law and gospel in balance. It's never one or the other, it's always both. On one hand we need guidelines, we need boundaries and expectations. And on the other hand, we need grace, we need God's love and forgiveness. Exactly, because we are not perfect...

We always need God's gentle reminder that we are good people, that we can go out there and try it again. God doesn't love us less when we fail; God loves us so we can try it again. When we have confidence in God's love and mercy, healing happens, abundant life happens!

Back to my story... I was born with a bad back; my posture has always been a little different. But it's never really been an issue for me. I've never really felt any shame about it. I don't know why, other than to know I made peace with it a long time ago.

When I remember that day in Jr High, and wishing I could crawl under a table, I wonder if it was the love of my parents that helped me get through it. You see, in their eyes I was the most important, most perfect kid in the whole world; well next

to my brothers and my sister, of course. My parents loved us unconditionally, and we all knew it!

When we see ourselves as the objects of love, we know and trust that we are loveable. This makes us whole and complete. And so it is with God's love for us. This is the good news today...

We are all are a little different in some way. And yet when God sees us, he sees us just as the perfect creation he created us to be. He knit us together while we were still in the womb. Each and every one of you is perfect, in how God made you, loves you and forgives you. This love is unconditional, you can believe it, trust it and live into it...

I might not have the best back in the world, but the way I see it, I stand up straight, in the love of God. And so do all of you...

Amen...

Let us sing...