Stand Tall: Compassion and Justice in Christ's Call

Dr. Catherine Cavanagh - August 24th 2025 - Wall Street United Church

Luke 13:10-17 NRSVA: Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Imagine the synagogue on that hot Sabbath day. The crowd presses in, trying to hear every word from Jesus. And then this woman creeps in, bent over, worn down, struggling perhaps even to raise her head. Everyone 'knew' in those days that to have any kind of disability was because of sin. They'd have thought this woman had sinned, or maybe her parents had sinned, and for whatever reason she paid the price with her disability. She knew it too, so she stays off to the side, maybe at the back.

But she's not without courage, is she? Because she's dared to come out. There's something about Jesus' message that she wants to hear more of. There's something about the community. She dares to be present. Nobody else really pays attention to her. But Jesus? Jesus sees her. He stops teaching mid-sermon — imagine that happening here! — and calls her forward, placing her at the center of the community.

When we hear that Gospel passage, we often miss that part. Jesus calls her forward first where all can see her. This is a person who has been overlooked and shunted off to the side for eighteen years. No more. Not in the presence of Christ! The first part of the healing he performs has nothing to do with her physical abilities. Jesus doesn't really care about our physical abilities, although he does care about our pain. The first part of the healing has to do with bringing her back into the community. In fact, Jesus isn't *just* healing the woman in that moment, he's healing the community.

It is our loss, as a community and as a world, when we set people aside. And we have done that so often in history not just to people who have disabilities, but to anyone who seems a little bit different for whatever reason. And that battle to see the humanity of all — to understand that everyone is a child of God and has a rightful place in our communities — goes on to this day.

Here at Wall Street we have made wonderful efforts to be welcoming to all people. I love our motto "God loves all; so do we". But I'm also happy to hear that we will be having an 'accessibility audit' in the fall. Because we don't see what we don't see. And for those of us who don't have disabilities, it's impossible to truly know what all the impediments are.

Let me give you a small example. As many of you will know, my mother died at the age of 91 on August 1st. She had always prized fitness in her life but nevertheless was severely disabled by the time she died and confined to a wheelchair. Now some of you met her either at my place or Sherwood Park Manor where she was lovingly cared for. But, despite a deep faith and decades as a church organist, you never saw her at church either here or anywhere else. Why? Because she was entirely dependent on Para Transport to get around. And guess what? They don't run in Brockville on Sundays. I never knew that until she needed it. So she literally couldn't be seen here.

Many things besides disabilities or cultural divides may weigh a person down and make them feel 'set aside'. Some of it is internal. Sometimes it's shame, or a feeling of worthlessness. Sometimes it's grief, or poverty. Maybe it's even a sense of our brokenness and inability to live up to our own expectations. All of these things and more can make our heads and our shoulders bow, and make us feel like we do not have the strength or maybe even the right to lift our heads and take our place in society.

Perhaps it's stress or worry that's weighing you down. There are many things we can do to try to lift ourselves if that's the case. Christ teaches us to pray and sit with God, and when he does so he's reaching back through time to all the prophets who gathered strength and were able to stand tall in the world because *they took time to be still, breathe deeply, and know God was with them.*

There are many other individual ways to relieve stress, but make sure they are constructive! I'm reminded of the sword maker who was feeling stressed, so he took one of his swords and ran it sharp side down on his grindstone. His assistant saw this and asked in dismay, 'Whatever are you doing?' To which the sword maker said, "Oh, I'm just taking the edge off!" So make sure whatever you do actually helps you.

Speaking of stress, there may be some of you who are feeling stress or a sense of loss over Pastor Kim leaving. That's normal. I was struck when I read today's reading that the woman who was healed had been bent over for 18 years — the same number of years that Kim has been the Pastor here. That is not at all to say that Kim was weighed down or burdened by her work here! There's no question she took great joy in it, and everyone here helped her stand so tall that she's now the Moderator of our church in Canada.

But the thing is, although the woman is cured and that's a great thing, this doesn't mean that her healing hasn't brought change to her family that maybe we can relate to. When she was bent over she may have had more time to sit and hold the hand and lend an ear to family and friends. Now she can go out more, do other work, participate more deeply with the community. Perhaps some members of her family felt a sense of loss even as they rejoiced with her? We can relate to that. I hope her family took a moment — after the party of course — to rest and listen to each other and be still. I hope they were able to 'Be Still and Know that God is There', to paraphrase Psalm 46:10, as they let the dust settle and life move on a little differently.

I invite you to do that as we go through this transition. Sit with that unsettled feeling. It's a bit like kayaking along a river, and everything is going smoothly. Then suddenly you realize there's a rapid up ahead. You can jump from the boat and head to shore, or you can fight the current, or you can trust the other people in the boat and work with them to get through ... and maybe you're going to have one of the most amazing rides of your life! Remember, even though things are changing, we have been presented with such an opportunity. I'll be preaching every second or third week, and I'm going to be exploring the Gospel of Luke. But in between we're going to hear wonderful preachers throughout the fall. We're going to encounter a richness of voices that we wouldn't hear if we weren't in this moment. We can sit, listen, discern and pray over what we hear. And that will allow the Spirit to rise in us so we can find our way forward together, as we have always done. This community after all, sees each person and values many voices. And we are strong.

When you are stressed or weighed down by anything, remember, Jesus sees you. He always sees us when we are most burdened. This is something that Luke, the author of today's Gospel really emphasizes throughout his writings. Earlier in his Gospel he has already recorded Jesus introducing his disciples to the beatitudes. They go like this: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. (Luke 6:20-22)

Now Matthew records these beatitudes as well. But in Matthew it's "Blessed are *the* poor." In the Gospel of Luke, it's so much more personal. "Blessed are *you* who are poor." *You*, because Luke wants you to know that Jesus sees you. Why are these people blessed? They probably, like the woman in today's reading, don't feel like they are. But Jesus is saying "God sees you in your suffering, whether it's physical or because of exclusion." When Jesus says they are blessed, he's saying God is drawing you close, just as Jesus does with the bent-over woman. You are blessed in your pain because God holds you closest.

It's like when your children fall down and cry. Of course you still love all your other children just as much, but you pick up and hold the one who is crying. You see and hear them, just as Jesus sees and hears both the woman who is bent over and each one of us in our pain. But back to our scripture. When Jesus says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment," and touches her, the healing becomes visible to all and she can stand up straight. Touch can be complicated — sometimes even dangerous. But when it's safe and welcomed, touch can be holy. I want to emphasize that it needs to be welcome, because not everyone wants to be touched and that is more than okay. But there are times when touch can be meaningful for some people. I'm thinking about: When a nurse holds your hand before a procedure: When a friend hugs you at a funeral: When someone lays a hand on your shoulder to pray for you.

The human soul was made for connection, and for some people connection happens through touch. Jesus could have healed her from across the room. He does that in other stories. But here, he chooses proximity. Because sometimes the soul needs a different kind of miracle — it needs to know it's not alone. And that is a miracle that we can replicate. Jesus calls us to invite people who are marginalized back into proximity in our communities and create a sense of belonging. It's what we strive to do here at Wall Street. We too can reach out to the one who is bent over by the weight of the world. Sometimes we use the expression "standing tall" to describe someone who has the confidence to know they belong. Wouldn't it be great if we all felt we could stand tall? If we all felt seen and heard?

Certainly, the moment the woman is healed she stands and begins to praise God. That's a beautiful thing! And she's in a synagogue so you'd think she'd be okay! But immediately the leader of the synagogue is there, trying to silence her and get things back on track. What a killjoy! These are the kind of people who want to hand out

speeding tickets to ambulances. You see, he's got a bunch of rules that he expects everyone to follow. As far as he's concerned, they're God-given rules. They come from the Ten Commandments. After all, in Exodus chapter 20 it says: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.*

But as soon as this leader has castigated the assembly and Jesus in particular, Jesus speaks up. Jesus takes him back beyond the words we've just heard to the heart of the teaching. The deepest meaning of that commandment is actually a message of prevailing and widespread compassion. It's compassion that is offered not just to the wealthy, but also to servants and even strangers and even animals. All belong. Jesus speaks up and tries to get the religious leaders to see that they've become so fixated on 'the rules themselves' that they're now missing the whole point of them. The system isn't working. Broken systems need to be called out. A rule or law is only good if it works towards protection and compassion for all. Remember, the holocaust was entirely legal.

As a current example I'm thinking of Donald Trump's recent decision to take over the police in Washington DC. His excuse was the crime rate, even though the crime rate there is at a 30-year low. It makes no sense. The truth is he doesn't want to see homeless people in front of the White House. Trump wants to clear them out. He doesn't want to see burdened people, like the bent-over woman. He's forgotten that laws have a purpose in protecting all people, seeing all people, not just the powerful.

It's not that we have to concern ourselves with the politics of DC. But we should be concerned about the fact that that ideology has the potential to spread. We need to be vigilant as Christians so all can belong. A community is stronger when we see each person, including those who are bent over the most. Christ sees all of us. So should we.

So the message in today's Gospel is not just about doing our part to welcome everyone, but we also need to call out the systems that keep people down, just as Jesus did. Both of these things — the active welcoming and the active calling out of injustice — remind us to pay attention, because often the people who are most excluded don't have the strength to advocate for themselves. As was the case with my mother. As is the case further afield in Sudan, where hunger and fear are also crippling a whole society. Or Gaza, where people have had to leave their dead under the rubble, as starvation and continued killings take their toll. And as is the case with the growing number of

homeless and hungry people here in Brockville. Speaking out does make a difference. This is a message of hope. Change is possible if we do follow Christ and lift our voices.

Let me give you an example. When you look at the history of LGBTQ2S+ people in Canada over the last century you see this interesting correlation with today's reading. For a long time (and it still happens today), people who were sexually or gender non-conforming would keep their sexual and gender identity hidden. Like the woman in the synagogue today, they kept to the edges. They were considered sinful, and often named as such by some churches. Then there was a rise in them speaking out about themselves, and a rise in the backlash from the authorities, which in turn gave rise to people speaking out against the backlash.

And finally a tipping point was reached, because people challenged laws, and people refused to hide, and people kept speaking up, and eventually legal equality was offered for all here in Canada. The United Church of Canada embraced that battle early and changed their rules in 1988, becoming the first mainline church in Canada to allow for LGBTQ2S+ marriages and ordination. Things are still not perfect in our society, but they are so much better because people spoke out. So there is hope. And may I add that we see you if you are LGBTQ2S+. But it took a LOT of speaking out. It took a LOT of following Jesus' example in today's reading and not letting sleeping dogs lie and pretending that everything was okay. It took a lot of courage. Sometimes the cost of doing the right thing is extreme, but it's what Christ calls us towards. And the cost is easier to bear if we take it on together.

So let me finish by bringing us back to where we started. Remember that you personally are blessed and seen by Christ. Remember that you belong here. We see you. Remember if you don't have the strength right now to speak out against injustice, that's okay. You do what you can, when you can, and offer the gifts you have. Maybe now is a time for receiving, and that is good. We're glad you're here.

Finally, I invite you this week to think about three things: First, what burden are you carrying that is weighing you down? Will you let Christ carry it? Will you believe how much you are loved? Secondly, who do you see when you look to the margins? Can you reach them? And thirdly, who needs your voice today?

So my friends, know that you are loved. Know that your burdens are our burdens, and Christ is here to shoulder them. Together we stand with Christ. We stand as he did with all Beatitude people. We stand tall, so others can stand tall too. AMEN