

# TO STAND UP STRAIGHT

Luke 13:10-17

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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Imagine that you are in the synagogue on the day we have just read about. A woman is there who is crippled. We do not know her name, but we do know that she has been crippled for 18 years. For 18 long years she has been bent over and unable to stand up straight or to lift her head up.

But her handicap is more than just physical. She is also crippled socially and emotionally because of the culture she lives in. Being female, she is not educated, and she does not have the same civil rights that the men in her day have. For example, she cannot decide whom she will marry, and she is not allowed to divorce her husband. She is considered the property of first her father and then her husband. In some ways she is no better off than the ox and the donkey, with which she is compared.

Because of the social discrimination she faces every day of her life, she is also emotionally crippled. She walks with her head down emotionally as well as physically, because she suffers from low self-esteem. All the women in her day were taught from early childhood to view themselves as less than men and as subservient to men.

So this woman, typical of her day, is crippled not only physically but also socially and emotionally. But then she meets Jesus, and everything changes. On this particular sabbath Jesus is at the synagogue, teaching. He notices the woman and calls her over. He says to her, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He lays his hands on her, and immediately she stands up straight and begins to praise God.

We know that the healing is more than physical, because the woman has the audacity to stand up straight and to praise God out loud in the synagogue, where women are not allowed to speak or to pray aloud. This woman has heard Jesus affirm her as a "daughter of Abraham," which is like saying that she is a child of God. All of a sudden she realizes that she is valued in God's sight, and that realization gives her the courage to speak out loud, praising the God who healed her.

This woman, who could not stand up straight, at least not until she met Jesus, lived 2,000 years ago in Palestine, but unfortunately she still lives today, in 2007, in China, in Africa, in the Middle East, and in many other places in the world. She cannot stand up straight physically because from early childhood she is not fed as well as her brothers. If there is not enough food to go around, the boys and men in the family get what there is, and the girls and women eat scraps or go without. Two-thirds of the hungry people in the world are female. According to the World Health Organization, "girls in many developing countries receive less nourishment than boys. They are breast-fed for shorter periods of time, receive fewer calories, and suffer from malnutrition at higher rates than boys. In rural Bangladesh, for example, malnutrition is almost three times more common among girls than boys."

Girls also have less access to health care than boys. The mortality rate is up to four times higher among girls than among boys in many developing countries.

And, of course, many girls never even get born. Their parents, using the results of amniocentesis and ultrasound, pre-select boys and abort female fetuses. One study conducted at a clinic in Bombay, India, showed that of 8,000 abortions performed, 7,999 were of female fetuses.

Another reason why our 2007 version of the woman in the synagogue cannot stand up straight physically, particularly in Africa, is because of genital mutilation. Approximately 100 million girls and women in Africa have suffered from this barbaric practice, which begins a life of unending pain and misery for them.

In the war-torn regions of the world, women and girls are routinely raped as a weapon of war. In the current genocide in Darfur, hundreds of thousands of girls and women have been raped and tortured by the government-sponsored militia. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the United Nations, said a few years ago that women and girls suffer the impact of war disproportionately. They are specifically targeted, he said, to humiliate the men of their society, to break down their resistance, and to achieve ethnic cleansing. Women are not the perpetrators of war, Kofi Annan said, but they suffer the most from it.

There is also a growing problem of sex trafficking in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In many places in the world, women and girls cannot stand up straight physically because of the treatment they have received simply because they are female.

But it is not only physically that many women today cannot stand up straight. They are also bent over socially and emotionally, like the woman in Jesus' day, because of their culture's attitudes toward women. In many Third World countries, girls often have to forego an education because their parents arrange for them to get married as early as age 12. Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to stay in school. Without a secondary education, these girls have little hope of being able to support themselves with adequate employment should the need arise.

Many girls never get to school at all. Two-thirds of the world's illiterates are female. It is hard to stand up straight and hold your head up if you can't even read or write.

And so, because of the social attitudes toward women in many countries that make them feel inferior, they cannot stand up straight emotionally. They walk with their heads down. They do not carry themselves as persons of dignity and value, for they do not feel valued. They endure the abuse that comes their way because they feel that somehow they deserve it.

And this attitude of low self-esteem on the part of many women is not limited to Third World countries. This attitude is also prevalent in the United States. Just look at the women who have suffered abuse from their fathers or their husbands. They typically walk bent over, with their heads down, not daring to look up. And they think they deserve the abuse they have received.

Now some of you who are here today may be victims of rape or abuse. You may be like the woman in the synagogue, unable to stand up straight emotionally because of the way you have been treated. If so, then Jesus says to you, "Come, and I will set you free from your pain and suffering. Come, and I will heal you and enable you to stand up straight and to walk with your head held high."

The woman in the synagogue, who was unable to stand up straight, is still very much with us in 2007---in China, in Africa, in India, in Latin America, and even in the United States. There is nowhere in the world where women have equal status with men---nowhere, not even in this country. It is sad to realize that there is nowhere where women can always stand up straight, with their heads held high. As Amnesty International reports, "from the battlefield to the bedroom, women are at risk." And so, as Sister Joan Chittister reminds us, the most important spiritual question of our day is not "Is there life after death?" but rather "Is there life before death?"

As Christians, we are called to be Jesus' voice and Jesus' hands in bringing healing to the women who cannot stand up straight because they are crippled physically, or socially, or emotionally. We are called to be Jesus' voice, by saying to women who are bent over and are unable to stand up straight, "Women, in the name of Jesus, you are set free from your ailment. We will do everything we can, with Jesus' help, to free you."

We are then called to be Jesus' hands, by laying our hands on the crippled women in love through special offerings such as One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, the PW Thank Offering, and the Peacemaking Offering. We are also called to be Jesus' hands by working for justice in Jesus' name.

At the denominational level, we have long been actively involved in working to overcome discrimination against women and in seeking justice and equality for women in this country and around the world. So as Presbyterians we are doing something to bring life before death to women and girls around the world. But what are we doing personally? And what more could we be doing?

According to an old Chinese saying, "women hold up half the sky." But it's nearly impossible for women to hold up their half of the sky if they are bent over from physical crippling and social oppression. Thus, it is to everyone's advantage---men as well as women---if women can stand up straight and can participate fully in holding up their half of the sky. Everyone benefits when women are treated equally with men.

Jesus sends all of us out into the world to be his voice and his hands in helping all people everywhere to stand up straight---women as well as men, children as well as adults. To stand up straight is everyone's birthright as children of God.

Let us pray: O God, help us to see one another through eyes enlightened by understanding and compassion. Open our ears to the cries of a suffering world. Empower us and move us to be your voice and your hands in bringing about your justice and equality everywhere, so that all your children will one day be able to stand up straight. Amen.

