

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Luke 13:10-17

I know. I've been on vacation, and you all want to know how it was. And more than anything else, you want to know how Isabelle was, and how smitten I am now that I've been introduced to my first grandchild. And I suspect you know the answer without asking: she was and is perfect, and I'm deeply in love. And yes, we have pictures – but they're still all on Ben's computer. Despite my promises to the contrary, I don't have any with me today.

Having gotten those matters out of the way, I want to tell you a different story from my vacation – one on the opposite end of the joy spectrum. In fact, I've debated a long time whether or not to tell you this story, because it's not a pretty one. But something keeps nagging at me that it's an important one, so here goes. Our flight west included a very long flight from JFK in New York to Salt Lake City. The flight was full enough that Ben and I weren't able to sit together, and I ended up 6 or more rows behind him – seated with a couple on their way home from Spain, where they'd been visiting their Mormon missionary son. In fact, they were bringing him home and looking forward to being reunited with the rest of the family. For some reason, I'd been assigned the middle seat, but I quickly slid over to the window so they could sit together. They were grateful, and before settling in, the woman walked off to check in with their son. While she was gone, the man talked to me about the terrible state of their marriage, referring repeatedly to his wife with what appeared to be his favorite 5-letter word, talking and reaching with his hands a bit more than I was comfortable with. And I couldn't help notice the smell of alcohol on his breath. In the first half of the flight, he left his seat several times and walked to the rear of the plane, presumably to use the rest room. The couple talked some but not a lot, and things did indeed seem pretty cool between them. Suddenly there came a point when she got up and climbed over him, woke him and told him to follow her. It took him awhile to do that, and about as soon as he got his feet under him, he fell face first in the middle of the aisle. They were gone quite awhile, and during that time, flight attendants came down to ask me if he'd been drinking in his seat, to which I answered no. When they realized Ben and I were together, they asked if there was another seat near him I could move to, but I said, no, and I was okay where I was. When the couple finally came back to their seats, he immediately went to sleep and the woman held her face in her hands. It was overwhelming to sit beside her pain and brokenness, and what I began to hear was of a man who has been in and out of treatment several times. He'd only been sober for a few months, and she talked about how fragile she knew he was. They'd been traveling for 12 days, and he hadn't been working his recovery program during that time. She'd suspected that he'd fallen off the wagon earlier in the day, and in truth, she had just learned that his frequent trips to the back of the plane were actually in part about getting bottles of liquor off the beverage cart so he could down them in the bathroom. Her faith and strength were incredible

– but so was her despair and weariness. She was grateful for the support that she knew would be waiting for them both when they got off the plane, but she had wanted this reunion to be about their son, not about their father's disease. And she was absolutely clear that the crucial decisions about what happened next were not hers to make, but could only be made by her husband.

It was a powerful start to my vacation, and one that came back to me when I turned to today's gospel lesson and read about a woman who had a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. I saw my traveling companion in that language, and a whole host of other people whose lives and wounds and circumstances have bent them over and broken them down to the point that they can't look up, they can't look around and they can't see the sky. They have to twist and struggle to catch the twinkle of an eye or the majesty of a mountain standing on the horizon or the potential that life might ever hold more possibility for them than the tiny view they have from their doubled over brokenness. Most of what they see is dirt and twigs and their own woundedness and pain.

The story tells us that she was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight, and I've never assumed that that was about osteoporosis. Sure, it may have been brought on by her failure to drink enough milk during all of those years of nursing her countless babies, but just as likely, it was from walking ten miles at least once a day while balancing water jugs on her head or stacks of firewood or baskets of apples and potatoes. Maybe it was the sweeping and reaching and cleaning and serving. Maybe it was that she'd been taught not to look up, that she wasn't fit to look a man in the eye, and if she didn't want to get cuffed she'd better look away and remember her place. Maybe it was all the rules and regulations that bent her over: things she could do, things she couldn't; places she could go, places she couldn't; feelings she could feel, feelings she couldn't. Maybe it was that people had, for so long, used her back as a bridge to get from where they were to where they wanted to be, walked over her, used her to get what they wanted, that she was now permanently fixed in a horizontal position rather than a vertical one.

In this woman, I see the people of South Africa 20 years ago, bent over by the weight of Apartheid, crippled by an economic and political system designed to keep them under the feet of the white minority. I see African Americans in the south in the 50's, picking cotton, drinking from water fountains reserved for coloreds, cowering in the dark at the snap of a twig, filled with visions of the clan. I see people who live in the prison of addiction, whose lives are colored and controlled by the screaming compulsion to drink or gamble or smoke or eat or snort coke. And who knows what wound or hunger preceded the addiction, what hurt is being medicated and masked by a crutch that has no ability to truly satisfy. I see the laborer who works hard day after day – making beds, clearing tables, stocking shelves, but simply isn't paid enough to make ends meet, and is neither offered nor able to afford health insurance. I see young people whose every dream, every spark of imagination, every impulse is squashed under the weight of tradition and expectation and appearances.

She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight, and 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, perhaps one in the small of her back for support, and one to her hand to help her as she straightened up, she did indeed stand up, stretching and reaching, straight and tall, once again able to lift up both her head and her spirit. Feeling the power of life course through her, up and

down her spine, she raised her eyes and offered God her thanks and praise – for healing, for liberation, for life.

This woman's healing is only part of the story. The other part is that it was the Sabbath, and Jesus was in the synagogue, surrounded by good and faithful people who were intent on living the lives that God had instructed them to live. And part of that meant not working on the Sabbath. And part of that meant not healing on the Sabbath. When they began to chastise Jesus, he turned on them and pointed out their hypocrisy: doesn't each one of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey and lead it to drink? If that's true, and you know you can't deny that it is, why do you value your animal more than you value this daughter of Abraham? Why is she less deserving of care than your donkey? At which point, they slithered off with their tails tucked between their legs, while the crowd rejoiced at the wonderful things Jesus was doing in their midst.

On the Sabbath, Jesus touched a woman, healed her and invited her to stand tall and free. While the leaders of the synagogue said he was breaking a crucial law, he said he was liberating a human spirit. When you stop and think about it, he could as well as not have said, she's been like this for 18 years, what's one more day, come back and see me tomorrow. But he didn't say that. Nor did he say that the law could be thrown out, that they didn't need to honor the Sabbath anymore. Rather, he challenged them to think about how they honored it. If the purpose of Sabbath rest was to be free in order to praise God, then he clearly decided to help this woman do precisely that. By his actions, Jesus called to them, and to us, to look not at the broken law as primary, but the broken person as most important.

Set free from her bondage, the woman stood straight and tall again. Stretching her neck, lifting her arms to the sky, she praised God for life, for healing, for liberation. I pray for that gift of new life for my Salt Lake City traveling companion, that together he and God might begin to walk the road that will set him free and help him stand tall once again. And I pray that our life together is far more about working with Jesus to lead bound and broken spirits into God's kind of healing celebration than about keeping the peace, maintaining the status quo or highlighting the letter of the law.

Let us open ourselves to God's healing touch on those parts of our lives that are broken and bent over, that we might again stand tall to praise God and live with freedom and joy. And let us offer ourselves to God that we might extend that same liberating love to others. Let us live by faith, walk in prayer, and let God lead us in the paths of healing and love. Amen.