

## **SERMON: The Bent-Over Woman**

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today. Although I will be addressing a very heavy subject with you (domestic violence and abuse), my prayer is that you will leave here with the hope and confidence that Jesus sees you, that Jesus is your advocate and that we are equally (women, men, children, teens and seniors) all children of God.

No one can argue that the world at large seems to be a place of tremendous suffering. First we have natural disasters, like earthquakes, droughts, famines, flooding and fires; then there are wars, genocides, refugee crisis's, terrible accidents, and horrible diseases. Add to that all types of crime, sexual trafficking, fraud, theft and mass shootings.

Ironically though, regardless of all this suffering, the majority of people's suffering happens in the privacy of their own homes. That's right - the family home, where peace and safety should be the norm, is for many a place of tremendous suffering. For many, it's the most unsafe place there is. Almost daily we hear stories of domestic abuse and violence that have happened in the privacy of someone's home, but the stories we hear are really just the tip of the iceberg and they are usually only the "extreme" cases. As much as we may not want to talk about it, domestic abuse or "interpersonal violence" is a rampant problem today, and it impacts us all. I have worked in the area of intimate partner abuse for many years, and the stories I hear are heart breaking and far too common.

The rippling effects and costs of domestic violence to our society are astounding. Up to 70% of the patients in our mental hospitals have been victims of family violence and abuse. Almost 100% of women trapped in the sex trade have been sexually abused as children. It has even been estimated that the costs to our health care system and to job loss productivity due to the consequences of family violence, amounts to billions of dollars each year. Some of the highest rates for domestic abuse in all of Canada are right here in our backyard, right here in Edmonton, Alberta. The police respond to domestic dispute calls more than any other calls, but we know that the vast majority of those experiencing abuse and violence never call the police. It makes us wonder, what really is going on in people's homes?

What really is family violence or abuse – why is it such a problem, how can we recognize it and what can be done to respond to it? I'm going to be talking primarily about abuse against women but that doesn't mean they are the only victims of abuse. Men are victims, children are victims, teenagers can be victims, the disabled, minority groups, and yes, increasingly in our world today, senior citizens are victims of abuse.

I would like to read you the story of the crippled and bent-over woman from Luke 13, and through this story talk about what it feels like to experience abuse, about the hope that Jesus offers to victims of abuse, and his displeasure with those who would be perpetrators of abuse.

*10* On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, *11* and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. *12* When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." *13* Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God. *14* Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue ruler said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath." *15* The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? *16* Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" *17* When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (NIV)

We will now take a look at the three main characters in this story: the crippled woman, the synagogue ruler and Jesus.

First, let's take a good look at this woman. She is bent-over (other translations tell us she is bent-over double), crippled and unable to stand up straight or look people in the eye, she's pretty much confined to her home and when she does leave her home it takes a great deal of effort. Being bent-over, she just shuffles along, one small step at a time, one foot in front of the other, hoping she doesn't need to go too far because it's so painful. Being bent-over hinders every aspect of her life, from doing her regular chores, to participating in the marketplace, to caring for her children, to conversing with her family and friends. Everything in her life would

be affected by her condition. On top of that, in Jewish society, she would be considered unclean; people would be hesitant to touch her or speak with her. Amazingly, she makes the huge effort to come to the temple to worship. She doesn't come to the temple to be healed though; she isn't looking for Jesus or for any particular blessing. More than likely she is convinced she is unworthy of any such attention or blessing. She has been bent-over for such a long time why would she hope that today would be any different. She is stuck, she feels it is a hopeless situation – there is no solution to her problem – she is bent-over, trapped for good, without hope of straightening up.

Luke emphasizes that her condition has lasted 18 long years. Most scholars agree that the 18 years may or may not be an exact number but that regardless, it points to the fact that she has been bent-over for a very long time. In verse 4 of this same passage, we read about the 18 people killed by the tower of Siloam falling on them. Luke makes it quite clear they were not guilty of any particular sin that caused them to be killed. In the same manner, Luke uses this number 18, to demonstrate that the suffering of this woman is not through any fault or sin of her own. The passage tells us that her crippling condition is caused by a spirit, which is very interesting because it is quite obvious that this woman is not demon possessed, so then why would Luke tell us that her infirmity is caused by a spirit? It's a good question...

Luke is trying to tell us something, and I believe one of the things he is trying to tell us about is what happens to people when they suffer under the effects of someone else's sin. This woman's bent-over, crippling condition can be understood as a metaphor, a powerful picture of what happens to people who are victims of oppression, oppression like domestic abuse. For women who are victims of family violence, the picture of this bent-over, crippled woman expresses exactly how they feel.

Firstly, let me explain a little bit about what abuse is. Abuse (regardless of its type), is really a pattern of behaviour used by someone to hurt, manipulate or exploit another person with the intent to gain power and control over them. There are numerous types or tactics of abusive behaviour. The one we hear most about is physical abuse, like pushing someone, kicking them, spitting at them, restraining someone, blocking their exit, depriving them of food, medication or sleep. You can well imagine how being a victim of this type of abuse would begin to weigh

heavy on someone – they would become “bent-over in spirit” – filled with fear and apprehension, worried about their next move lest they be terrorized again.

Another form of abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, is probably the most common type of abuse, and for many victims the most devastating. Emotional or psychological abuse includes verbal putdowns, making a person feel worthless, criticizing them excessively, brainwashing them, and making them feel they were the cause of the abuse. It’s saying things like, “I wouldn’t have to call you stupid, if you didn’t do stupid things”. It’s minimizing the abuse by saying, “I’m not sure what you’re making such a fuss about – it’s not like I hit you”. Emotional abusers create a no-win situation for their victims and make them feel like they are going crazy.

Other types of abuse include that of isolation abuse, sexual abuse and financial abuse. All victims of abuse become filled with shame, guilt, self-doubt, and low self-esteem. They have trouble making decisions; they often become hopeless and depressed, losing sense of who they are. They talk about feeling angry, depressed, afraid, trapped, confused and paralyzed. They in fact become bent-over in spirit, just shuffling along, putting one foot in front of the other, surviving, but not really living.

On top of all of this, there is spiritual abuse which is far more than just not allowing someone to attend church. Perpetrators of spiritual abuse are masters at twisting scripture to gain power and control. When God’s name is used to endorse certain behaviours, the assumption is that this type of behaviour comes with a divine authority that no one can argue with. The victim of spiritual abuse becomes convinced there is no way out, they are meant to suffer this way, that God is punishing them, that this is their cross to bear and God’s will for them. Again, you can see how this would cause a victim of abuse to become bent-over in spirit.

I believe the bent-over, crippled woman in this passage, represents millions of people, especially women, children and seniors in our world today who are victims of abuse. I am positive there are a number of you here, this morning, that can identify with this woman because you or someone you know, feels bent-over, restricted and paralyzed because someone else is exerting destructive power and control over you.

Thankfully, the bent-over woman is not the only person in this story - there is Jesus. We are told in this passage that Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, and that while he is there he *sees* the bent-over woman. To the people around her she is invisible, but not to Jesus – he sees her – he sees her crippling condition – he knows what she has been through – he knows how she is feeling – he understands her oppression. He sees her pain; he sees how she shuffles slowly into the synagogue, how people avoid her because they don't know what to say, he sees her struggle to find a seat. His heart goes out to her.

Jesus is so filled with compassion for this woman that he boldly initiates contact with her. He's not afraid of her condition, he's not afraid of the fact that she is a woman. He's not afraid of the so called "religious laws". His compassion overrides any of the risks involved in reaching out to her. He goes to her, and says, "*Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.*" No strings attached. Suddenly, this woman who has been bent-over double for 18 long years slowly begins to stand up straight - she immediately recognizes that this is the hand of God and begins to shout out, "Hallelujah!! Hallelujah!"

But, all of a sudden, there is a shift in the story. The synagogue ruler is upset – he's lost control of the service and in his mind, some very important rules have been broken. He's "in a huff", and so he attacks the woman and Jesus by saying to the crowd, "*There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath.*" He sees the healing of the woman as "work" which shouldn't be done on the Sabbath. He sees Jesus and the woman as law-breakers. He's incensed that anyone would defy his authority as the synagogue ruler. He shows his contempt for Jesus and the woman by speaking to them through the crowd because he doesn't think them worthy of a direct response. He twists the Ten Commandments teaching about the Sabbath, he's defensive and insinuates that Jesus and the woman are law-breakers; he blames them for disrupting the service and for undermining his authority. For his trump card, he quotes scripture because he believes that God is on his side, and therefore his actions and attitudes are sanctioned by God.

This synagogue ruler represents perfectly the attitude and behaviour of a perpetrator of abuse, because his primary concern is to maintain power and control. He feels entitled to have certain rights and privileges and will do whatever is necessary to maintain those rights and

privileges. Deep down, he believes he is superior to the person he is abusing and therefore feels justified in his abusive behaviour.

It is at this point that Jesus turns to the synagogue ruler and says, “*You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? And this woman, who is a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, should she not be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?*” The fact that Jesus speaks in the plural – “you hypocrites”, is an indication that he is not only speaking to the synagogue ruler, but also to everyone who thinks like the synagogue ruler. Jesus uses forceful language, “you hypocrites”. In effect, he is saying, “You frauds – how dare you twist the scriptures to meet your own agenda – how dare you care more about your rules than about the suffering of this woman. How dare you keep her in bondage by twisting the very scriptures meant to bring her freedom? How can you care more about your animals – untying them from their stall to lead them out to water, but not being willing to untie this woman from a stall of oppression?”

Jesus is not about to let the synagogue ruler with his rigid rules, his callous attitude and wrong use of scripture put this woman back into prison, and so he confronts the synagogue ruler, and the crowd, by standing up and advocating for the woman. He says, “*And this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom she is, should she not be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?*” Jesus calls this woman, a “Daughter of Abraham”. She is not a person of lowly status, a second-class citizen; she is not unclean or untouchable, inferior; she’s not just a helper or a sidekick. As a Daughter of Abraham, she has equal status to the sons of Abraham – she has all the rights and privileges of any child in the Kingdom of God. She has an equal share in all the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. The lies of Satan which the synagogue ruler and the people of the day believed, had attempted to strip away those rights, but Jesus reinstates them by announcing to the woman and everyone else, her rightful name and place, a Daughter of Abraham.

How did the synagogue ruler respond to Jesus after being reprimanded? The passage tells us “they” (plural again) were humiliated, ashamed. They knew they didn’t have a leg to stand on, and had been rightly chastised. But sadly, they didn’t change. As those who wanted to

maintain their power and control, they simply rationalized their behaviour and convinced themselves they were doing God's will. Their abusive attitudes eventually led to getting rid of Jesus altogether.

If any of you are feeling bent-over because of the effects of abuse in any form, I want you to know that Jesus sees you, he really sees you, and wants to set you free from the hurtful experience of sins committed against you. If you have believed that somehow you deserved your abuse, be assured that Jesus says, "The abuse is not your fault". Jesus sees you and has tremendous compassion for you. If you have been tied up in a stall of bondage that is filled with lies, Jesus has come to untie you, to speak truth to you, to loosen your bonds and set you free. Jesus knows everything about you, whether you are a victim of abuse or a perpetrator of abuse. Jesus sees you and wants to reach out and touch you, so you can be free.

What can we learn from this story about how we can respond to those who are "bent-over" because of abuse? It goes without saying that our default should always be to pattern our response after Jesus. First of all, just as Jesus *sees* the bent-over woman, let us also begin to *see* what Jesus *sees* – people who are bent-over in spirit, people whose voices are been stifled and whose choices are been taken from them, people who are trapped and crippled by the effects of abuse and who are struggling to keep going emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Listen and watch for signs of abuse - reach out in compassion like Jesus did.

Also, just as Jesus recognized this woman was suffering through no fault of her own, let us be careful not to blame victims of abuse or to give pat answers to complex circumstances. No one invites being mistreated – no one deserves abuse, or has "it coming" for any reason, at any time.

And just as Jesus became an advocate for this woman and spoke up on her behalf, I encourage you to become advocates for the abused and become their voice when they cannot speak up on their own. Let us listen and believe their stories, let us validate their feelings and create safe places for them to come and be heard.

Just as Jesus became fired up when he heard the scriptures being twisted to endorse rules and theologies that would keep this woman bent over, we need to become fired up when we hear

scriptures being misused to justify the oppression of anyone. Let us be prepared to challenge the status quo when necessary and to speak out on behalf of victims. Let us learn to recognize the subtle lies that hold so many people hostage in abusive relationships throughout the world.

Also, just as Jesus held the synagogue ruler and those like him accountable for their false beliefs and abusive actions, as a Christian community we ought to also hold perpetrators of abuse accountable for their behaviour and attitudes. I have heard far too many sad stories from victims of abuse whose church communities resisted holding the abuser accountable resulting in the victim becoming even more bent-over and helpless.

And finally, just as Jesus reached out and provided healing and hope for the bent-over woman so that she straightened up and praised God, let's look for ways to become a place of healing sanctuary for victims of abuse, and even perpetrators of abuse, while we speak to them about God's love, justice and healing power; and share with them the true gospel message of freedom, of equal value, blessing and privilege for all humanity – all people created in God's image.

As we leave here today may I bless you with this prayer of dedication:

We offer ourselves to you, O God our Creator.

We offer our hands.

Use our healing touch to comfort sisters, brothers and children who are afraid.

We offer our eyes and ears.

May we see and hear the signs and stories of violence, oppression and abuse,  
so that all may have someone walk along side them in their pain and confusion.

We offer our hearts and our tears

May the hurt and sorrow of the broken echo within us.

We offer our own stories of violence, abuse and oppression.

May we be healed as we embrace each other.

We offer even our anger.

Make it a passion for justice.

We offer you all our skills, gifts and abilities.

Use these to bring an end to all violence and oppression.

We offer our faith, our hope, our love.

May our encounters with oppression bring us closer to you and closer to each other.

All this we ask through Jesus Christ who knew the pain of abuse and violence.

May God give us strength!

AMEN.

Joanne Van Beek, M.Div  
R.R. #2  
Leduc, Alberta T9E 2X2  
Canada

780-986-1368

780-910-4479

[jvanbeek@xplornet.com](mailto:jvanbeek@xplornet.com)