

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

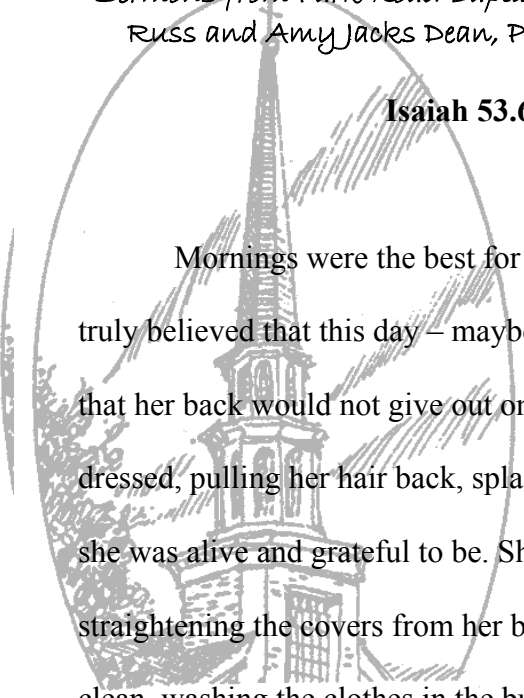
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

Bent Out of Shape

Isaiah 53.6-9a;13-14 and Luke 13.10-17

August 22, 2004

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Mornings were the best for her. After a good night's sleep, she was rested and truly believed that this day – maybe this day – after 18 years of this, would be the day that her back would not give out on her. So she set about her daily routine: getting dressed, pulling her hair back, splashing cool water on her face to remind her that indeed she was alive and grateful to be. She started preparing her household for the day – straightening the covers from her bed, tending to meals, keeping the dirt floor swept clean, washing the clothes in the bucket drawn from the well, while saving a little of the water to clean up the few dishes she had dirtied. She had learned to give into the first twinges of pain – that nagging backache that reminded her oh so well of the beginnings of labor pains. If she just stooped a little, it would ease the pressure, and give some relief. But as the day wore on, it was the crick in the neck that finally would get the best of her. That gnawing pain was the absolute worst. By the time it was time to walk to the synagogue for Sabbath worship, all she wanted to do was to crawl back in her little straw cot of a bed and give her back a break. But it was the Sabbath, so she dragged herself there yet one more time. By the time she reached the gates to enter the place where the women could worship, the pain had moved from her back through her neck and straight to her temples. How could she have ever let herself hope that this day would be any different from any other day in the last 18 years? She went to the synagogue to worship and when it was over, she would return home to rest her weary bones to face a new day –

one that would again be filled with hope. Everybody knew her for she came there every week. She had a name, I'm sure of it. "The Bent Over Woman" but some just called her "Stooped." I always hate it that these women don't have real names, but the Bent Over Woman took her place in worship. She prayed. She listened. She learned to put aside her pain just long enough to know the presence of God – believing that the Yahweh of her ancestors would come to her and give her peace. She could tolerate the aches and pains for these few moments – bent over to ease the pressure - pretending that they did not exist for just long enough to hear a word from God. That's all. No greater expectations. This was her ritual. It was a moment of Sabbath when her soul could override her back - if only for a Sabbath moment she felt some release from her infirmity. At least that's how every other Sabbath had worked.

What is it that keeps you bent out of shape? Is it rheumatoid arthritis? Is it osteoporosis? Is it a slipped disk? Is it old age? Is it the burden of financial debt? Is it the intense pain of grief? Are you depressed? Are you carrying the burdens of all of your family and friends so much so that you have become weighted down? Are you overwhelmed and overworked, feeling as if you are about to drown in an out-of-control life of your own making? Is the empty nest just a bit too lonely? Do you worry about a health crisis – for you or someone close to you? Are you facing surgery or in the middle of treatment? Do you worry about the success and happiness of your grown children? Do you worry about the safety of your children? Do you worry about your ability to Raise them Right? ("Raised Right" is a phrase from Ferrol Sams book Whisper of the River) Do you worry about your wayward grandchild? Are you lonely? What is it that keeps you bent out of shape?

“Woman, you are set free,” Jesus said. Oh – Sabbath words. “You are set free.” Sabbath worship brings those words to us so that we can face a new day tomorrow. But those religious leaders just couldn’t let it go. “You’ve got 6 six days to do your healing, Jesus – surely you can get it done in that amount of time. The sabbath Law is that no healing is to be done on the Sabbath – for that would be like work.” To which Jesus responds, “What could possibly make for a better Sabbath than to use it as a day to set people free from all that keeps them bent out of shape.” (My translation)

And so we gather here today – our day of Sabbath observance - to worship, but I am here to tell you that some of you are bent out of shape. And you want to know how I know? Some of you have told me and in some of you I just see it. In the story, “the house is divided: the adversaries are put to shame; the crowd rejoices. Such is the effect of the presence of Jesus and the inbreaking of God’s reign . . . A crisis is created; but if setting a woman free shatters an unhealthy peace, then crisis it has to be. (Craddock, *Preaching Through, Year C*, page 384)

There’s a challenge before the church, you see, and Jesus addressed it head on. Some had come for worship – like the Bent Over Woman. Some had come to work – like Jesus. And in that moment the Church faced a crisis. The two sides were polarized: keeping the Sabbath Law vs living the Spirit of the law. “[In setting this woman free from all that binds her] Jesus has not only violated Mosaic law, but also breached religious and social protocol by addressing a woman and doing so in the synagogue. . . Jesus’ act of mercy speaks of the grandness of God, unbound by human laws, requirements, or restrictions. As always, God reserves the right to work above and beyond our limited perceptions.” (Michaela Bruzzese, July/August 2001) “Jesus rejects the rigid

interpretation of the law and insists instead on the spirit of the law – that the Sabbath provides liberation and renewal for all.” (August 2004)

Now in our day and time, we don't have to wrestle with the guilt issues surrounding Sunday and work. Our culture has moved away from honoring this day as a day that should be different – even in the Bible Belt. In my household growing up, you didn't play cards on Sunday. You would never think of cutting your grass or cleaning your house. Little league sports teams didn't have Sunday practice or play. You wouldn't run to the store to pick up a few things, much less do your weekly grocery shopping, because no stores were open. You remember those days. But we live in a new day when this Sabbath day is another workday for many. I'm not going to preach about that polarity. But we do have another crisis at hand in the church – and here I'm talking about the Church capital C, as well as, this particular church. And here it is:

Do we come here to renew ourselves or to heal others?

Now I don't believe we have to pick one of these and just be that: a receiver or a healer. It is absolutely essential that the church learn how to dance the delicate steps to be both. The truth is that each time you walk through those doors and enter this quiet place of sanctuary, you have to decide: today, do I need to be healed OR today, do I need to do some work to offer healing to someone else? And so I ask you, in these holy moments, are you bent out of shape? Wouldn't it be powerful to ask for a show of hands? You'd be shocked at how many of us would raise our hands. You have come here today, dead dog tired, some burdened by weight unimaginable, others burdened by things that are much more petty, but burdened nonetheless. You've just come here for worship – never dreaming that someone would say, “You have been set free.” But hear it, for it is God's

best grace. You have been set free. For these few precious Sabbath moments, you have been set free. Is your burden now magically gone? No. Though Luke does not report it, he says “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God,” but I would bet she was still a little stiff and sore, and at the very least she became known as the woman who used to be Bent Over, and she probably always carried that name. In other words, hoping against hope for some magical release of all that keeps you bent out of shape is probably the wrong hope. Instead, you should come to this place hoping to so experience the presence of God in the company of the faithful that you are able to carry the burden a little bit better. I’m convinced that Sabbath worship exists to renew us.

The truth is that each time you walk through those doors and enter this quiet place of sanctuary, you have to decide: today, do I need to be healed OR today, do I need to do some work in offering healing to someone else? And so I ask you, in these holy moments, do you have it within you to set others free, to help them carry their burden? Martha Horne, a contributor to a study resource entitled “The Living Pulpit” says, “There is more to Sabbath than the cessation of labor; Sabbath observance includes an act of compassion towards those who are dependent on us, or those who cannot care for themselves. To keep the Sabbath is to honor God by having compassion on the weak and lowly. Much is said, these days, about the need to recover a sense of Sabbath in the church and in society. A recent conference at the Seminary where I work identified “more Sabbath time” for faculty and students as a goal. I’m sympathetic to the intent. I know that our lives are too frenetic and frantic, that we need more time for rest and reflection. What concerns me, however, is our tendency to think of “Sabbath time” as time just for ourselves – a break from our normal routines and responsibilities, and a chance to pursue

our own interests and projects. Have we lost an understanding of Sabbath that is “other-directed” – that points beyond ourselves to God, of course, but also to those who are dependent on us and need a compassionate response from us?” (Living Pulpit, April/June 1998, page 23 – by Martha J. Horne – Dean and President of the Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary in Virginia)

This story from the gospel of Luke calls us as a church to dance the delicate dance. There need not be a crisis. There need not be chaos surrounding this polarity. Some of you have wondered about our mission statement and our recent push toward service. “But what about us?” you ask. If we spend all of our energy out there, how will we take care of ourselves? I’m too tired to do what I have to do much less taking on something else that would require even more energy. How can we take care of our community and even the world if we are attentive to ourselves? You may ask, how can we send money to outside endeavors if we can’t meet our own budget effectively? The church has long suffered from the notion of either/or. Now people really get bent out of shape by stuff like this. We are *Becoming Disciples Through Worship and Service*. And sometimes worship will be about what I need from God and sometimes it will be about what other people need from God. And sometimes service will be about people who are poor and oppressed and sometimes service will be about helping ourselves.

Jesus challenged the Church and its religious leaders to think beyond the box that they had created – to let worship be a place of grace, restoration, and work – being attentive to what you need and what you have to give.

“On the Sabbath Jewish people greet each other with the words, ‘Shabbat Shalom,’ which literally means ‘Sabbath Peace.’ But the word ‘shalom’ suggests more than peace; it suggests wholeness . . . To greet someone with the words ‘Shabbat Shalom’ is to say, ‘may this be a day of wholeness and holiness for you.’ (Living Pulpit, April/June 1998, page 37 by Donna Berman, Rabbi Emerita of Port Jewish Center in Port Washington, NY) So people of God: Shabbat Shalom to all who are bent out of shape; Shabbat Shalom to all who are willing to utter the words “You have been set free.” Shabbat Shalom. May it be so.