

## **WHAT BENDS YOU OVER?**

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Today we have a relatively simple healing story. Most of the commentaries and sermons on this passage only give the bent over woman a quick pass and go on to talk about Jesus' teaching and reprimanding the synagogue leaders for being more concerned about the law than love. Now this is a major theme of Jesus' teaching especially in the gospel of Luke. I have this week however found myself drawn to the image of the woman.

What really caught my attention this time is that Luke says that a spirit caused her to be bent over. I am not sure why I never caught this but problem was not a physical condition but a spiritual condition. Part of what drew me to this section was a paper I was writing for the storytelling academy. This was a review of the various performances and workshops that we attended.

Saturday morning of the festival I attended a workshop on embodying the story. This was focusing on how we can communicate information about the story we are telling with our bodies. I do not remember the exact statistic but only 25% of the information we get hearing a story is from our ears. The other 75% is all in posture and body language. This is of course what makes emails, text messages and tweets so dangerous.

I was out for my morning walk one day at the conference and there was a woman standing at the bus stop. Dressed perfectly but with a face that would sour milk. I almost wanted to say something to her, but her body said, "Don't talk to me, I'm really angry." This class taught us to convey those emotions without saying a word. We focused on how we carry emotion in our head, heart, gut and pelvis. For example I might show a person grieving by their carrying their grief in the heart. (demonstrate) Now imagine that they are showing joy or pride.

I will use this in my road to Emmaus story for my show. Demonstrate. So you see the pain we carry shows up in a variety of places in our body, but in general it seems to bend us over, weigh us down. As I listened to the clinician talking about the various places we carry our pain, our joy, our emotions I noted that they align quite closely with four of the seven major chakra points in our body, head, throat, heart, and gut. Now before you think I've gone running off to the ARE at the beach Wendy and I learned about these chakras from a Roman Catholic nun at Washington Medical Center when Wendy completed her Reike training. Chakras are universally known from Native American medicine men, through Buddhist teachings, Hindu tradition and most Asian cultures.

So the question to ask is what bends you over, weighs you down, what blocks up and drains your energy?

Hearing the stories of so many people I am aware of the pain and the burdens that so many of us carry. I see many “bent over” women and men in the course of any given week. As a group most of us are at least figuratively bent by something that has power over us. As a group we also tend to cling to whatever bends us over.

A therapist I once worked with described life something like this. We all are born with a backpack, but it is empty. As we walk through life we fill the backpack with our experiences. Life giving experiences do not weigh the pack down but the painful ones are the rocks we toss in one at a time. The weight often accumulates slowly and we do not notice the ever increasing burden until that one last heavy rock goes in and we find ourselves bent over. Then it is time to take off the backpack and dump the weight that burdens us.

The problem is we have often become attached to those rocks. They are part of who we think we are. Maybe this is the case with the woman. I wonder if she knew the weight she carried that “bent” her over. I wonder if Jesus had asked her if she would have willingly given that up? I wonder if Jesus knew that he had to free her right then and there because he knew what she needed better than she did.

A Jesuit author William Barry wrote the following: *There is in us some power that is inherently conservative; that wants the status quo to be preserved no matter how painful it is. I may be between a rock and a hard place, but it is my rock and my hard place, and I know how to cope with the situation. Leaving it is very difficult, no matter how painful it also is to stay.*<sup>1</sup>

Now I know from my own experience both as a person and as a priest that this is true. One day long ago when God and I were not on speaking terms a person said something like this to me. It was a turning point through in which I encountered Jesus again for a second time. In fact it was in reading Marcus Borg’s books the God We Never Knew and Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time that finally I was able to unload my personal backpack. But it all flowed from my being willing to dump that backpack of rocks even though some of them were rocks I knew so well.

I am reminded of an experience that happened while on a trip to Germany with the Cleveland Youth Wind Symphony when my son Jeffrey was playing French horn in High School. We were in Constance Germany and had stopped to visit a

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<sup>1</sup> Barry, William A., S.J. *Paying Attention to God*; (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1990); p.47.

very famous cathedral in town. As the group explored the church I noticed a niche in the back that was an area about 6 ft across, 6 ft. high and a few feet deep. In this was the most incredible statue of Jesus that I had ever seen. Not a biblical scene, but Jesus seated on a rock with the crown of thorns on his head. Looking beaten and broken, yet there was this feeling of invitation to me. The invitation was to place my burden my yoke on him. It was as if he was saying, "It's ok, I can take it. I can take all of your pain." When I got home and unpacked this experience with my spiritual director he had me meditate on doing just that. Then he prayed that the burden I was carrying would be lifted so that I could walk as the healthy beloved child of God that I was. It was a moment that changed my life just as the healing of the bent over women changed her. I could lift my eyes from the ground and look to the hills. That is the power of Christ.

Since that time I have learned a very useful way to dump that load of rocks and it is right outside our door hear in the prayer garden. The Labyrinth is a wonderful spiritual exercise for dumping those rocks that we carry. Take that backpack into the Labyrinth and pray as you go in that Jesus will receive and relieve you of your burden. I have even literally carried a token that stood for whatever it is I needed to dump into the center. When you reach the center place whatever it is at the base of the tree out there and then thank God for taking that burden from you as you pray your way back out to the entrance.

You can rest assured that you have given that burden to Christ and he will help you stand up straight and walk.

Closing prayer:

Gracious and loving God your will for us is health and unity with you. Help us this day to cast off whatever it is that binds us, that bends us over so that we may stand up straight, look to the hills and praise your name. AMEN