

Grace Episcopal Church Galena, Illinois
August 25, 2013

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text- Luke 13

When I was a little girl, growing up in my tiny rural community, there was a very old woman--or so she seemed to me--who was bent over. Not just the curved upper back and shoulders of osteoporosis, but bent double from the waist as far as our solemn bows. I would see her at the corner of Main Street next to my Uncle Vern's drugstore with a shopping bag over her arm. To look up from her view of the sidewalk, to look into someone's eyes was an effort, indeed. I don't remember seeing anyone talk to her.

Like the woman in our Gospel story today, she was bound by this terrible affliction, forced to lead a limited life. Luke's woman most likely had an additional burden--the belief that things like this were punishments or curses was common, so people affected were often shunned, pushed to the margins of the community.

We do not know why either of these women was bent over. It could have been a dietary deficiency or genetic condition, but apparently there was no treatment or relief. Today, we do not often see something so severe, and advances in medicine have helped with prevention and treatment. Not entirely, of course, for as many of you know first hand, there is still the pain of arthritis and spinal problems, knees and hips--often with equally painful treatment. I hope, though, that we are at least past the marginalizing of those who suffer.

Physical issues aside for the moment, there are still many ways that people in our time are bent double, pushed to their knees--by poverty, oppression, and yes, racism. This weekend thousands are gathering in Washington D.C. to commemorate the August 1963 March on Washington that culminated in Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. More than 200,000 people, black and white marched peacefully, lead by King and five others. The primary issues were jobs and freedom. The organizers worried--would it stay peaceful? Would anyone come? Only nearly a quarter of a million--buses converging from all corners of the country.

This 50th anniversary comes at a time when tensions are high, when progress in equality is acknowledged but many lament that King's dream has not been fulfilled. In fact, there seem to have been backward steps in the hard won voting rights, in economic justice, in the blatant racial inequities reflected in our prison populations, and in the uproar of the recent Trayvon Martin case. The banners, signs, and t-shirts are more varied this time--yes, jobs and racial equality are still there. Some of the same issues with new twists--economics: the widening gap between rich and poor. And there are many newer ones--marriage equality, women's rights to choice.

Paul Rauschenbusch, great grandson of the father of the social gospel movement at the beginning of the 20th century reflected on the famous quotation by a 19th century abolitionist about the moral arc of the universe paraphrased by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. King replied this way to a question about how long it would take to achieve true equality:

"How long?" he asked, "Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Rauschenbusch wonders about that moral arc today. He wonders if "a combination of false satisfaction and organized attacks have the potential to flatline the arc and reverse the hard fought gains made by those who seek justice for the African American community.

"The moral arc of the universe," he says, "is about the transformation of that which 'is' to that which 'can and must be.' That includes the redemption of every single life, transformed with the vision of a more just and equal world; a vision that King dreamed of and preached about 50 years ago this week. The most dangerous mistake we can make is to be blind to the continued injustice or assume that the moral arc of the universe moves towards justice on its own and that we are not a part of the bending."

Sounds like God's realm to me. We are to be part of the bending with that, too, or in the case of our Gospel text, the "unbending."

Jesus and his critics in the Temple that day had a fundamental difference of perspective. The critics saw healing as "work"--prohibited on the Sabbath. Jesus saw it as unbinding, unbending, releasing from suffering, and restoring to community. The need continues.

I wish I could be in Washington, DC this week. I was not there in '63. I was too concerned with my teenage "crises" then, and barely registered what was going on. But now, I would like to be there. Since I can't, I will be here at church on Wednesday at 2 o'clock when the bells ring across the nation to honor the Dream and to renew the hope of its completion. For we are all daughters and sons of Abraham. Each of us in need of unbending our bodies or souls in some way. And each of us has a role to play in bending the arc toward a world where we live as the Beloved Community. Will you join me?

Amen.