

MESSAGE "Love Me Anyway" {based on Luke 13:10-17}

I heard the following story of a man who said, "While I was studying theology, I was involved in a car accident and had to wear a cervical collar. Two weeks later, I tripped over a wire and ended up on crutches. When I hobbled into class shortly after these mishaps, I was greeted by a fellow student. "Welcome back," he said. "Or, are YOU our final exam?"

The Hunchback of Notre Dame, written by Victor Hugo, is the intriguing story of Quasimodo, a deformed, almost deaf, hunchback bell-ringer of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France in 1482. When Quasimodo is publicly beaten and left in the sun, Esmeralda, a beautiful Gypsy dancer, kindly gives him water, saving his life, and he falls in love with her.

Later, Esmeralda is sentenced to death by hanging, having been wrongly accused of 'attempted murder'. As she is being led to the gallows, Quasimodo swings down by the bell rope of Notre Dame and carries her off to the cathedral under the law of sanctuary.

Thousands of the peasants of Paris surround the cathedral to rescue Esmeralda, but Quasimodo assumes they are there to hurt her, so he drives them off by pushing off gargoyles and large stonework pieces. The King, seeing the chaos, vetoes the law of sanctuary and commands his troops to take Esmeralda out and hang her. She dies and Quasimodo cradles her in his arms until he dies of starvation. Sad ending! And that's the story of The Hunchback of Notre Dame.

Fred Craddock was a seminary professor and a preacher, and he liked to attend his home church whenever he could. He was supposed to go out of town one Sunday morning to speak, but it was within driving distance so he went to an early service at his church first.

He had to skip out before the service was over, and to save time he took a short-cut through the choir room on his way to the parking lot. He was surprised to see, in the choir room, hanging up her robe, a woman he knew well, who'd been singing in the choir for years.

Craddock was in a hurry, but curious about why she was there when the rest of the choir was still in church. He asked if she was all right. She looked up and said she was quitting. "What do you mean?"

Dr. Craddock asked, "Are you resigning from the choir? After all these years?" "No", she said, "I'm quitting this church. I've been here for years, and nobody pays any attention to me.

Nobody knows me at all. In this church, nobody cares." Fred looked at her and said, "You're wrong." She glared back at him and said, "I'm right."

Craddock glanced at his watch, conscious of the irony, and said, "I've got to go, but let me tell you, you're wrong." As he dashed out the door, her voice trailed after him, "I am not; in this church nobody cares..."

Let's revisit the hunchback theme by looking at a story from the Bible, but this one has a good ending.

As you will remember, our Gospel story for this morning is about a woman who "was bent over and could not straighten up at all." Isn't that an interesting way to be identified? She has no other name that we know. History has named her, judged her and labeled her by her appearance, by what's wrong with her, by her situation.

Anyway, it's the Sabbath—the holy day—and the Jewish people have come to the synagogue and Jesus is teaching. Like every first century synagogue, the men are in front and the women are in the back.

Despite this, somehow Jesus notices this woman—bent over. The Greek translates as "doubled over." She probably has a cane in one hand and her head toward the ground. She is probably used to going unnoticed. This poor woman has been living this way for 18 years slumped, bent, hunched.

Do you know what happens when you spend 18 years looking at the ground? I don't know much about it, obviously, but you've got to miss a whole lot that is going on around you.

But this woman who is bent over, the Scripture says, was crippled by a "spirit." Do you know what that says to me? That says, there was a time in this woman's life, before this happened to her, that she could look up or straight ahead. She could look people in the eye.

At some point in her life, she had been stronger, maybe even healthy. But something had happened to her, and whatever it was, she couldn't leave it behind. It might have been an illness, but I don't think that's what this is about.

"Crippled by a spirit" indicates that there is something that has gripped her entire being, or has assumed power over her. That "something" is causing her to live life in a crippled state, as 'less than'.

It's so powerful that it dictates her actions, how she speaks, where and when she goes, how she acts, how she thinks of herself and how she thinks of others.

When a spirit has crippled you, it can take everything from you. Have you ever seen someone walk around, stooped over—with bad posture, slumped shoulders, and eyes that will not look you in the face?

I see a lot of people like that. Over the years, I've known a lot of teenagers who look like that.

When researching articles on this topic, I read about a minister in Mississippi who would meet a lot of older African American people who looked that way.

What might cause a person to be like that? Low self-esteem can cause a person to walk bent over. Guilt can be such a heavy load to bear that it might cause a person's back to bow. Abuse can make people hunched over.

Human beings can do unspeakable things to each other. Ever seen a puppy that has been severely abused? People can look like that too!

I've told this story before, but it's been a while:

A young college student was walking across campus one day when he came upon an older woman who was in one of his classes. She also went to the same church he attended.

They got into a conversation that day and for some reason, at some point, this woman said, "I believe in Jesus and I believe in heaven, but I will never be there..."

He was really shocked by her statement and this started a rather lengthy conversation. It turns out that as a child she had been abused by her father. He would molest her and hurt her and tell her she was worthless. And then, when she got older, she married a man who was just like her father. He hurt her and told her she was a liability, and she believed it. She had internalized it. It had become who she was. Her low self-esteem could not let her imagine being good enough to go to heaven. She wasn't worthy of such love. I think that is the state of mind of the woman in our Gospel Lesson.

Have you ever felt as if you weren't good enough, or that you weren't worthy of being loved? I think many of us have - maybe some of us still do.

J.B. Philips' translation of the New Testament reads that the woman had been "doubled over due to some psychological cause."

This is the bent-over woman! She is everyone who has ever struggled to rise above the pain of oppression, low self-worth and the judgment of others. She is everyone who has ever struggled with illness, addictions, loss of value, loss of a spouse, or self-esteem or innocence. She is anyone who has been told "You can't" and believed it. She is anyone who has lost hope.

And as she makes her way to her seat on that balmy Sabbath morning, Jesus calls to her. Notice He didn't shout: "Hey, YOU, crippled lady in the back row!" or any other label that anyone in her past has used to identify her.

Jesus called her in a way that she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that He was talking to her. Scripture says, "Jesus saw her," and then, "He called her forward..." Jesus saw her for who she was. Jesus knew her - knew her utmost secrets. Jesus saw her in all her humanity, frailty. He knew what she had gone through, what she thought of herself, what others thought of her. But Jesus loved her with a love that is crystal clear, unconditional, the most beautiful thing in all the world!

And when she comes to Jesus, at the place of peace, sanity, love, and acceptance, she hears Jesus say: "you are free from your infirmity; you are free from your oppression; free from judgment; free from shame. You are no longer under the power of this thing that has controlled your life for so long. You are free to be who you are and not who others tell you, you are. You are free to live in the grace and mercy of the One who loves and cares for you and knows everything about you. You are free to love yourself, accept yourself. You are precious, you are cherished, you are adored!"

Then Jesus "put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God..." The leader of the synagogue doesn't like this because Jesus has healed someone on the Sabbath, but Jesus calls him a "hypocrite."

And then He turns to the woman and He calls her "daughter." Daughter! He looks at the crowd with their mouths still wide open and lovingly reminds them that this woman, the one who they have made to feel "less than" for all these years is as much a part of them as the leader of the synagogue. He reminds them that the family of God is not about shaming people into community, or marginalizing those who struggle, it's about bringing all people to the center.

I don't know if you are bent over today. I don't know what may or may not have a hold on you, or how far out into the margins you may feel. I don't know what you struggle with, or what is in your life that has claimed power over you, but I do know this. We all, to some extent, live "bent over" lives.

It may or may not be in the form of a debilitating disfigurement—in fact, no one may be able to see that you are bent over at all, but Jesus knows it. He has seen you in the back of the room with your cane, and that makes no difference! He loves you, and at this very moment He is calling your soul to "stand up straight."

And when Jesus calls you; to the "you" inside, to the "you" He created, to the "you" that He died for, to the "you" that He loves no matter what - what He is offering you is life... life that is rich and full and free.

We don't have to live bent over to any *thing*, any *one* or any *label*, ever again, because the One who knows the truth about us, sees all of it and still calls us His son or daughter! AMEN