

Luke 13:10-17 The Bent Over Woman

(Bends down, picks up a coin) – Excuse me, I just noticed this. Force of habit! It's amazing what you find when you keep your eyes down...the floors of this world have a lot of overlooked treasures!

I greet you in the name of the Holy One of Earth and Heaven, and I thank you so very much for inviting me to tell you my story, on this, the Lord's Day.

And I'm excited and fascinated to learn about how you keep and celebrate your holy day – the Lord's Day. What a blessing that you meet together on the day of the week that Jesus defeated the power of death. I can't think of a better way to celebrate Life than to meet with sisters and brothers who also bow, and stand in awe, before the Giver of Life. Never underestimate the power of this gathering, my friends. And never be afraid to bow toward the earth, or to stand tall. The Sabbath calls you to both.

And so now tell me...on this most holy day of the week, you gather here, but how do you celebrate when you have left this place? Is your Sabbath sweet to you? Do you treat yourself today? Do you treat your Creator as well? Something delicious to eat, to do? Some scrumptious, delightful act of worship, or loving action, or rest? And what about the Earth – do you give the earth a Sabbath too, stepping lightly on its rich brown life, carefully measuring your use of its resources...or maybe lying silent in a field shining golden with beautiful, brave, persistent dandelions, or that other glorious weed - mustard.....lifting your face to the golden sun and simply saying thank you?

The Sabbath can restore much that has been lost. This I know in my bones. It's true; much *has* been lost. Who knows what we may find, or what may find us when we welcome the Sabbath Queen today?

I'll tell you...before I met Jesus through his community of friends, before that the Sabbath for me was...

Well...

Not exactly "just another day" – not that –

It was a burden. There were rules. What we could and couldn't do...it felt...heavy, like a weight I couldn't carry, a judgement, an empty cradle where there ought to have been life and there was none. Something is wrong, something in you has been lost, the Sabbath said to me. It is so very much different for me now.

I'll try to tell you in a way that makes sense – tell it straight. But the stories of our lives are so seldom straight, don't you agree? They bend over, and curve and wiggle and dance.

But I'll do my best.

I'm not sure what happened to my body. I'm told that as an infant I seemed healthy and normal, but at the time when children begin to pull themselves up and stand straight – I just didn't. My body stayed in the crawling position. To help you understand, the best way to describe my body's posture is that I looked like a question mark.

No doctors, no priests, nothing helped. My parents were poor farmers, and they did the best they could. I remember learning to stand, practicing standing on my feet instead of crawling. To crawl was so much easier for me even as I grew – but I practiced, bore the pain and slowly learned to walk. But my back – my back just wouldn't be moved, and I walked facing the ground.

I don't know if you can imagine how that would be – what life was like for me then. I won't go into detail, only to say that it was hard. The things we take for granted – seeing the sky, looking into the eyes of friends – having friends at all – none of that was part of my life.

But that wasn't so bad, truly – the worst part, I think, was feeling the disappointment of my parents. They were told it was their fault, - some sin they had committed, and so they treated me with a mixture of pity and guilt and resentment, because I was their burden for life. Marriage was out of the question, and it was my family who would have to support me. So I not only felt burdened, I felt LIKE a burden. Not only that, but as though I was to blame. Surely it was something I had done, hadn't done...something I should have been and wasn't – those feelings, unspoken, pushed harder and harder at my soul until I was as bowed in spirit as I was in body. Sometimes, like Job's comforters, rabbis or friends would speak to me or to my parents: "We don't understand the ways of the Holy One" they'd say "It must be something you've done – or your ancestors. The holy scriptures say that the sins will be visited on the children's children for generations." And when we would try to suggest otherwise, they wouldn't engage the question but rather, suggest another tidy answer "then it's to teach you a lesson. Bear up, daughter, and learn what God intends from your infirmity"

And like Job, I resisted, I resisted that idea of the Holy One and the Divine way....but sometimes, like my body, my mind was a question mark. Why?

I worked at home, tending the small garden and doing some housework. I didn't go out much – I didn't want to shame my family or endure the villagers' stares.

The other part that was especially difficult was that no one, apart from my family, knew my name, or cared to find out. I was "the bent over one" "that crippled girl belonging to Aaron and Miriam." Do you know what it's like to be known only by a label? Perhaps you do.

Children used to make fun of me...I could hear their laughter, and I knew they were mimicking my posture. I still know the feeling of having to steel myself before going out in public. I would retreat to a place inside myself where I would be numb and protected from the names, the laughter, the pitying looks, the judgemental silence.

One good thing, though – I noticed things that others didn't. I became an expert at finding things. Like the dime I found on the floor just now. You'd be surprised how much money you

can find that way! Bits of jewellery, some broken pottery, I picked it all up, - most of it unwanted by anyone but me, and kept it in a jar. It's come in very handy since, but I'll tell you that part later.

So I kept my jar of found things, and I learned to know the earth. I knew how to recognize the beauty of a broken piece of glass shining bravely out of a mud puddle, and the delight of cherishing something that someone has discarded, dismissed as without value. I still do that. Now, I call it ministry.

I used to try to stay out of sight, going out only when others weren't around, like on the Sabbath. There are strict rules for our people about how far we could walk on that day, but when you're a cripple...no one cares, or notices, so I used to walk while people were at the synagogue. I wasn't welcome there; the scriptures say that the deformed will not enter the kingdom, and some believed it. So I'd walk while others worshipped. Looking at the earth, sometimes finding a coin or two, enjoying the sounds and the silence of a village at prayer.

One day, I came across a place where others had gathered not long before. The Teacher from Galilee had been there – and there had been a scene. A woman, caught in the act of adultery (there had been a man involved too of course, but no one seemed to have a problem with that) she was dragged into a field and was about to be stoned as the scriptures prescribe, but the Teacher had defended her. I had heard about it all, but everyone had a different version of the story. You know how that goes.

And so this was the field where it happened. I saw the footprints, some of them ground deeply into the dust by self-righteous heavy feet...and then I saw some writing in the sand. I couldn't believe what I read! A simple sentence – a brief, transitory thought, soon to be erased by the wind or by the careless footsteps of those who refuse to look down...

The words I read were like a gentle, warm caress on my aching back; like a ray of hope that was both welcome and terrible – what would it mean if it were true? It seemed too dangerous, and I scuffed it away with my sandal. The sand got under the strap and chafed my foot as I began to walk away.

A shadow fell across my path – before I could turn, she stopped me. “Tabitha” she said “It's Ruth. I live just over there, on the other side of this field”.

She knew my name! And called me by it! I didn't know what to say, and so I said nothing. She waited a few seconds, then kept speaking.

“I've seen you many times. I'm ashamed to tell you that I was one of the children who made fun of you in the street. And I've never spoken to you before, but Tabitha, I've changed. And it's because of the Teacher. You should have seen what happened today to Rachael – they were going to stone her!”

I didn't tell her that I had read what was written in the sand. Never, until this moment, have I told anyone. I remained quiet. Ruth went on. And on. She told me about the Teacher and

how he said that our Creator was a God of Love, whose Word calls into being a community of friends. She said that the whole earth was part of it, everyone and everything. She stopped, out of breath.

I stood still, looking at her feet as she bounced from one foot to the other, and the bottom of her robe golden, the colour of the earth when the grain is ripe for harvest. There seemed to be nothing to say – she touched my shoulder, and her hand felt hot. I flinched, but didn't move away.

“Everything and everyone, Tabitha. You too. Come and see.”

She squatted before me and looked into my face.

“Come and see.”

I did.

We went to see her friend Deborah, then Mary, and Joanna. For the first time, I was known as Tabitha. It was a new world for me. They were friends and followers of Jesus. Jesus said that he had come to bring division, and so he had. First for them and then for me. The division of night from day and the separation of truth from falsehood, brought into being with a force as mighty as ...as though the very heart of matter were being split in two, releasing an energy that has power to shatter worlds, to bless, to make whole.

What a group we made! So much talk, so many things to learn about one another and life and our awesome Creator! It seemed as though we'd never stop talking and laughing and reaching for more. Once, when we were at Deborah's home, she realized that one of the coins on her headpiece was lost. We all started to search, and after some time it looked as though it were gone for good. But ah – such a sweet memory –

It was my own eye, so practiced at being focused downward – my own eye that caught the glint of gold in the crack between the tiles of her outer room. We cheered and laughed. They picked me up, my crooked body like a question mark in the air as we danced like that at how the lost had been found.

“The next time Jesus comes by” Deborah said, “let's tell him about this. This is how it feels when the dream of God comes true. And this is the Spirit, who will stoop to anything to find what has been lost”. And we did.

I thought of my jar; the one full of the coins I had found over the years, and I smiled to myself at how different this search had been. This time I had searched out of my strength, out of friendship. It was not the desperate downward gaze of a woman lonely and without hope. In the company of these women, this circle of friends, I seemed to grow tall, and although my back remained bent, I felt a power in my core, ready to break free.

They kept asking me to attend the synagogue for Sabbath prayer. It was the one thing I couldn't bring myself to do. I did, however, join Ruth at her home, and was shocked at the difference from what I had experienced as Sabbath. In my home, it was a series of “don'ts”. Don't work, don't play...

But here, in Ruth's home, the Sabbath was greeted as a guest. She and her family waited for it the way they anticipated a delicious treat. I watched in amazement as they got out their best dishes, prepared the special foods with loving care, brought in candles, polished the holders until they gleamed golden in the candles' flame...it was an attitude and atmosphere foreign to me. Strange. Wonderful.

The Sabbath, not as a burden, but a delight. Ruth and her family talked about welcoming the Sabbath Queen.

The whole experience fed me, and as a result, I finally got the backbone to at least think about attending the synagogue. I promised myself that next Sabbath I would go. As it drew near I wished I hadn't done that. I was changing my mind. Wimping out, you modern people would say. – and THEN, we found out that Jesus would be there – I didn't know if that was better, or worse! In the end, I decided to go. And you know part of what came next. I braced myself, and flanked on either side by my friends, walked into that room. I felt the stares, heard the whispers, there was no way to be inconspicuous, but I also felt the warm strength on either side of me from Deborah, Ruth, Mary and the others. We stepped into the inner court. It was cool in there, and smelled of candle wax, and sweat. The room went quiet.

A voice came from the shadows, to my left. . "Tabitha" he said "I'm so glad to meet you" There was no question in my mind – that voice was Jesus.

You know...there was a time, not long before that, when I would have cowered; been speechless and self conscious before a man I didn't know, before any man, before anyone. But I DID know this man. His friends had brought me to him, and to myself, and in answer to the question mark my crooked body made, they had answered "yes!" In answer to the haunting, horrible questions about why, and in the midst of fear and uncertainty, they had called forth a chorus that spoke the words of Job's trust in the midst of doubt: "We shall come forth as gold" And the gold, the treasure – was where gold is always found. Beneath our feet, disguised in the dust and grime, lost - until someone takes the time and the trust to look for what has been lost. We shall come forth as gold. The treasure is in the community of Jesus and his friends; the treasure, the gold IS Jesus. It was as though I already knew him; as though through them I too was part of his circle of friends; all of us bent over, not by oppression but in awe and thanksgiving. All of us looking at the ground, knowing we are one with it, in the glory and the mud. I didn't cower, I didn't flinch. I walked in the direction of that voice.

Luke reported only what was important to him about the encounter, but did you know that Jesus said "Tabitha I am glad to meet you. I've heard so much about you" He knelt down in front of me then, looked right into my face, and whispered a sentence. One single sentence – one I had read in the sand that day: was it yesterday, or a lifetime ago... One sentence, whispered in my ear

And I whispered back.

He threw back his head and laughed. A deep, belly laugh; a laugh that brought tears to his eyes, and to mine as well. He understood what I had said, with my lips and with my heart. I felt a

warmth, a strength like light and fire go through me, and I stood straight up, for the first time in my life, and laughed with him.

I can't explain it any more than I can explain the beauty of the stars. I only know what happened; that it is so.

From then on it was easier to travel with them, and I did. I learned so much, and of all the things I learned, one of the most blessed gifts is the beauty of Sabbath time. This now, is how I keep the Sabbath:

In my home (which I purchased with the money from...you guessed it - my jar of found things) in my home, I welcome the Sabbath like a Queen. I use my best dishes, I love unfolding my prettiest table cloth, I get delicious food ready the night before, and after worship – I sleep. The best sleep of the whole week, is the sleep of the Sabbath, right in the afternoon! And then, I rise to welcome the guests I have invited; usually people who need to look up; people who are alone, or bowed over in some way as I was. We celebrate together with food and friendship. It is no longer a burden; it is a delicious joy. For this unspeakable gift I have my friend Jesus to thank, who taught me what, and who, is valuable in life. Through him and his friends I can now see the sky as well as the earth.

I pray that you, who are also his friends, can be the instrument through which others like me learn of their own worth – and hear the words of Life that both lift us from the ground while grounding us more deeply there.

Keep the Sabbath, my friends, bow out of your strength, and lift your faces to the skies and to each other. Shabat shalom.

Question for reflection: what words do you think were written in the sand? What words did Tabitha whisper back to Jesus that made him laugh?