

***The Gospel of Luke,
a Theological Application to our Lives***

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Luke 13:10-17. Hunchback Woman. I Love my Self but Hate my Body

Tradition ascribes to Luke the profession of physician, based on the medical terminology, more in evidence in his two volumes than in the other New Testament writings. In no other gospel do we find with such frequency, words for healing, *iaomai* (“heal”) or *therapeuein*. On occasion his diagnosis of an illness is more clinical than that in the synoptic parallels. Jesus is incontestably one who restores people to health and heals our ills.

Luke develops his understanding of illness and health from his understanding of human nature. For the Greeks, the *kalos kai ágathos* (“sound and good person”) constituted the ideal, and health was an expression of the beauty and goodness of the individual. A healthy soul lives in a healthy body (*mens sana in corpore sano*)¹ and enjoys harmony in body and soul, an expression of the moral life; the healthy balance in all aspects of the person is the determining factor for well-being.

The person who exaggerates her efforts regarding health or physical fitness is not necessarily healthy. A person who recurs to cosmetic surgery and adjustments is not necessarily healthy. When a person is sick, something is lacking, her dignity and self-esteem suffers. Healing restores personal dignity and balance in life².

This becomes clear from two healings narrated by Luke: that of the hunchback woman (13:10-17) and that of the man with dropsy (14:1-6). Both healings took place on the Sabbath, the day God rested from labor and pronounced the creation good. For Luke, healing restores integrity as God designed it. Every time Jesus heals someone, he collaborates with the Creator; he reveals to the

¹ “A sound mind in a sound body,” or in Latin “*Mens sana in corpore sano*,” a well-known motto, stands for the ideal of versatility. A person is only healthy when he is occupied both intellectually and physically.

² For the Benedictine monastic, healing and health happens when the balance between *ora* and *labora* is maintained, to the degree that the monastic keeps an even keel in relation to the Word of God (*lectio divina*) and human words (the common life).

woman and man, that we were created according to God’s design and handiwork. Luke, a skillful theologian, offers a theological vision of illness and health.

Psychology recognizes the connection between the body and the spirit. Some physical ailments are to a degree psychosomatic or “somatizations” (“soma-symptomatic”) of the spiritual state. Health of body and soul go hand in hand. How many of our back disorders are related to tension and stress—the difficulty in bearing the cross—? How many of our foot and leg pains relate to stumbling or moving ahead in life, experiencing confusion or insecurity where we find ourselves? Besides real allergies and chronic viral infections, some respiratory problems are related to spiritual and emotional constraints? And digestive complaints—gastritis, constipation, colitis— are sometimes related to our affective or emotional state, telling symptoms that people do not digest life very well or with ease? Hypertension can be a symptom of the apprehension and abuse of power and authority. In a word, illness distorts our personal dignity. Healing restores the individual with her essential beauty and wholeness.

The Hunchback Woman (Lk 13:10-17)

Jesus was teaching in a synagogue.

There before him was a woman who for eighteen years had been *possessed by a spirit that crippled her*; she was doubled over and quite unable to stand erect. Jesus saw her, called her over, “Woman, you are freed from your disability,” and he laid his hands on her. At once she straightened up, and she glorified God (13:11-13).

The woman’s disability was not just physical; it also manifested her psychological or spiritual condition. A spirit belittled the woman, bent her over. Luke describes her: [*she*] *had been possessed by a spirit that crippled her*”. The woman is hunched over, weighed down by life. Symptoms of her depression: shallow breathing, drooping shoulders and curved spine; her complexion has lost its natural glow. The curved spine might indicate repressed feelings, worries, or anxieties carried like heavy baggage. Repressed emotions can cause us to droop and sigh.

What caused her chronic disability? Had her back been broken in an accident or was it malformed from birth? Whatever the cause, she could not stand upright. She moved around with chronic pain³ for the past eighteen years.

³ The Greek word *pantelés* (“quite unable to”, “whole”, “absolute”, “completely”) describes her illness as incurable.

Doubled over, she could not “look up” to God.” Had she lost contact with the transcendent dimension in life? Her sight was focused downward or sideways. Did she suffer from low self-esteem? Was she pretty in anyone’s eyes?

In this hunchback Luke portrays the human being oppressed, fractured, her dignity shattered. Jesus looks and really sees the afflicted person. Sometimes, faced with deforming or inconvenient illness, we look the other way or pretend we don’t see. But Jesus looks and “sees”; later he will “raise his eyes” to see Zacchaeus in the tree (19,5), or at a dinner party Jesus directs his gaze at the woman with the broken bottle at his feet and addresses the Pharisee: “Simon, do you see this woman?” (7,44). Jesus is not indifferent to human misery; he singles out and has compassion on the afflicted. Once he perceived her depression, he addresses her, and so frees her from the isolation that has kept her “down under”; for once somebody overlooks her shame. The description in Greek, *prosfonéo*, “calls her over” (“name someone”, “call”) puts Jesus in relation with the woman.

With the hunchback present, Jesus “laid his hands upon her” and with the words, “Woman, you are freed from your disability”, he pronounced healing and liberation. In contact with Jesus, the person recovers her freedom and dignity. Jesus who is raised from the dead, raises the depressed woman and restores her health and dignity. This is expressed by Jesus *laying his hands on her* (cf. 4:40).

In the gospel and in Acts, the laying on of hands is a healing touch, along with the invocation of the Holy Spirit. By the imposition of hands God’s Spirit invades the woman. The Holy Spirit heals the woman’s weakness and binds the crippling spirit. The disciples also lay hands on the sick (Mk 16:18), and free the afflicted from the power of evil. The gospel urges us to be freed from old patterns of life, released by God’s saving power and love, and conceive of ourselves as God has designed from the beginning. Jesus touches the woman, and she straightens up and glorifies God. Contact with God has been restored.

The Greek word translated “straightened up”, *anorthóthe*, expresses the restoration of a house or home. Jesus restores and refashions the woman according to her original beauty and integrity; Jesus restores his damaged home, his sanctuary, where God dwells in glory.

After the healing of the hunchback, the synagogue president reacted with anger. On the Sabbath one is prohibited from doing any labor; and the religious experts interpreted the woman’s healing as human work, while Jesus presents healing as God’s work. The synagogue president makes the letter of the law more

important than the person. Jesus answers by referring to treating animals that need to be led out of the stable to drink: “*Is there one of you who does not untie his ox or his donkey from the manger on the Sabbath and take it out for watering?*” (v. 15). The permission to untie the ox or the burro implies that a person can lose humans from what binds us. God, the liberator of all, freed people from slavery and now restores our dignity and frees us.

The Sabbath reminds us of creation and the exodus from slavery. On the seventh day God rested from creation and contemplated its beauty and integrity (cf. Exod 20:8-11); the Sabbath commemorates Israel’s redemption from slavery (cf. Deut 5:12-15). For Jesus, the way to celebrate the Sabbath is to restore human life, to restore human dignity and praise God, the goodness and beauty.

The assembly’s reaction is joy “at all the wonders he worked” (Lk 13:17). People are overjoyed for the new-found freedom in Jesus. With the healing of the hunchback, Luke invites his community to straighten up, be freed of the evils that keep God out of our line of vision and our walk in life. Freedom is extended to the audience, so we can rejoice in our dignity and return home healed, healthy, and restored in friendship with God.

Home game

Jesus did not ask the lady if she wanted to be healed; he initiated the therapy. Analogously in your own life, how does Jesus invite us to be healthy? In what ways have you preferred spiritual, moral, or physical illness to the health that God freely offers?

Violation: the victim

For the thousandth time the woman revisited in her memory that single event in her distant past, which has stigmatized her for life. She was a pretty girl, a fresh flower, light and sweetness, effervescent joy. Affection, given and received, was natural to her among family and friends.

Affliction intruded in her gentle soul and opened a wound that would infect every stage of her life. Call it violation, abuse, rape, seduction —no single word grasps the horror and its consequences. Was it when her young cousin played with her and touched her out of curiosity? Was it a father, a brother, or uncle who grabbed her coarsely? A girl friend who taught her to feel that way? Did someone entice her, force, or grab her, press him or herself against her? Whatever it was, at five or eight or twelve or sixteen years of age, it has marked her life.

Why does she feel dirty, secretive, and unworthy? Does she fear she may have conspired in some unconscious way to excite the evil touch of another person? Does she fear that, innocent as she was and ever shall be in this, she may have in some unwilling way enticed or excited the senses of her predator-victimizer and thus become the accomplice in guilt? Does she feel ashamed because she may have derived some forbidden pleasure in what happened to her?

Now with tears and horror she tells and retells her story and gets no relief. The experience has conditioned her ability to relate to people, and she questions her motives, manages tentatively and inconclusively her emotions. She questions her commitments in life: did she marry young and frantic to try to escape from a cycle of inner pain? Did she isolate herself in shame to hide her past? Did she sublimate the horror and transpose it to piety or spirituality, because the body had been violated and no longer pure? Now an adult, as she faces the mystery of her person and sexuality, does she doubt herself, question her motives, wonder how far the boundaries would extend if given free rein?

As a mature woman, how can she treat the stigma, so it heals and does not keep hurting, paralyzing her relations with others? How can she believe in herself and trust God?

The woman begins to forgive herself. She was not guilty, and it's wrong to suppose that a victim could be culpable, but that fact does not remove the sting of guilt, anger, and confusion. It is like a child who is out playing in her clean dress, and she gets it dirty without wanting it, without knowing it, and when she goes to Mother, she is ashamed and feels, somehow, guilty. She is not. She did not decide to get her dress dirty.

For healing to happen, the woman begins to think of her life as bigger than an action or one thing that was forced on her. What happened to a little boy or a little girl is not the sum total of life? She has grown, she has been formed, educated, she has made decisions that have molded her present life. A negative experience during youth is one piece in the complex puzzle; it is not the whole picture, but it can be a very big piece. Perhaps what is done in counseling and therapy is to appreciate the whole jigsaw puzzle of life, and try to understand how that lost piece fits in.

With the residue of experiences in our early life, let us be patient and compassionate. If our thoughts or memory invade us, passion or desire obsess or overwhelm us and invite one to alienate him or herself, she may find release from

bondage, not in a religious matrix and outward forms, not in the scrupulous, endless washings of the stain, but in God, who delivers us from bondage on the Sabbath, the day that admires the exquisite beauty of creation, when a new horizon opened up and a former way of life was transformed by contact with Jesus.