

*Standing Tall*  
Luke 13:10-17

It seems strange to preach about a “bent-over woman” from a pulpit that is straight up and down. Take this pulpit, for example. It’s solid wood — beautiful and dark and stately. Likenesses of the gospel writers are carved into its four corners. These men seem thoughtful and scholarly, attuned to the Word of God. I would think this pulpit has been around for awhile, and I don’t think it’s going anywhere anytime soon. Dare the earthquake, lightning strike, flood, or tornado to knock it off its pedestal. It is four-square, solid, and secure.

It’s this pulpit — as well as platforms and podiums — that make it a summer for standing tall. This summer is broad-shouldered and sure-footed, from presidential candidates to Olympic athletes. Need I name their names? Simone Biles, Simone Manuel,<sup>1</sup> Katie Ledecky, Allyson Felix ... Turn-back the calendar four weeks, and there’s Michelle, Hillary, Chelsea, Ivanka, Merryl ... Mike, Joe, Tim, Donald and Barak. Bright lights, chanting and signs, balloons, biopics, and the national anthem: the sights and sounds of this summer could signal a medal ceremony or career-defining speech. The red, white, and blue could adorn a political stage or an Olympic platform. When it comes to exuding confidence, this summer stands out.

And yet, all of this stand-out-and-up-ed-ness doesn’t quite stand-up to “a woman bent-over for eighteen years.” It seems a bit out of whack. Pulpits, podiums, and platforms are not the natural habitat of the bent-over ones. The bent-over ones are often out of sight. Often unnamed. And many times, unknown. How could a bent-over one even stand in this pulpit? It’s hard to imagine.

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I’ve tried to imagine it — to imagine the woman in our story— as I’ve sat in the pews these last few weeks. Where would someone “bent-over,” or even small in stature, stand to be seen and heard? It’s not likely to be the pulpit. And the lectern doesn’t seem especially hospitable: someone, who, for whatever reason wasn’t tall (or tall enough) would be looking through openings in the railings, at best. Standing on the stairs at the table in front of the communion table would likely be out of sight, and standing on the floor might pose a similar problem. It would require some ingenuity and perhaps some give and take, to make space *in this space* for a person “bent-over for eighteen years.”

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<sup>1</sup> cf. [http://www.mercurynews.com/sports/ci\\_30236449/olympics-michael-phelps-shares-historic-night-standfords-simone-manuel](http://www.mercurynews.com/sports/ci_30236449/olympics-michael-phelps-shares-historic-night-standfords-simone-manuel). Simone Manuel, tied with Penny Oleksiak, won the gold medal in the women’s 100-meter freestyle in Rio, Brazil. The women set an Olympic record with a time of 52.70 seconds. Manuel is “the first African-American woman to win an individual title in swimming.” In addition to her Olympic record and gold-medal win, Simone Manuel’s name became more widely-known when it was inappropriately omitted from the original headline which titled her story in the *Mercury News*. cf. <http://mashable.com/2016/08/12/mercury-news-simone-manuel-olympics/#WksSVMrbjmqs>.

Religious authorities faced a similar dilemma in the Biblical story of the bent-over woman. She all-but disappears from view. Considerably more visible and much louder is the debate that occurs between the synagogue teachers and the rabbi known as Jesus.

Yet again, Jesus crosses the boundaries of Jewish law. “There are six days on which work ought to be done,” the synagogue leader says. Learned and vocal — and, in this case, male — the other rabbis make their case against Jesus.

You can almost see the chest of the synagogue leader get bigger and bigger as he becomes increasingly indignant. He’s angry, and seems to take personal offense at Jesus’s transgression. Like a judge in a courtroom ensconced in a box high above his subjects, the leader of the synagogue pounds the gavel and demands order. “I am in charge here,” he seems to say. Follow the law.

“You hypocrite,” Jesus responds. Sounding at least as indignant as the synagogue leader, Jesus cuts him to the bone — and not only the leader, but his followers as well. “You hypocrites,” Jesus says. He challenges their integrity, and subverts their authority.

Jesus’s authority derives from God, and he stands on God’s greatest commandment. As he has said in other times and places, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’” And, “‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”<sup>2</sup> God’s greatest commandment is love.

Jesus not only proclaims the commandment, he shows what love looks like. As any effective rabbi might do, Jesus begins by giving an example to which his particular congregation can relate. On any given sabbath, he points out, any one of you might untie your ox or donkey and lead it away to give it water. As a person has compassion for animals in their care, each person is called to have compassion for the other.<sup>3</sup> “Love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus says.<sup>4</sup> And then, as Jesus does better than anyone, he embodies the commandment to love.

Jesus reaches-out to the woman.

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The woman is unnamed. And her story is largely unknown. Scripture tells us: she is Jewish; she has “a spirit that has crippled her for nearly eighteen years;” and she is “bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.” That’s all we know of her — Jewish, crippling spirit for eighteen years, bent over and quite unable to stand.

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<sup>2</sup> cf. Matthew 22:36-40. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> In their book, *Women in Scripture: a dictionary of named and unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical books, and the New Testament*, Meyers, et al. note that Jesus’s approach reflects “the rabbinical mode of arguing from the lesser (ox, donkey) to the greater (woman, a daughter of Abraham).” Meyers, Carol, ed. Toni Kraven and Ross Kaemer, associate eds. Houghton Mifflin Co., New York: 2000.

<sup>4</sup> John 13:34. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

I've always imagined the woman as an older adult. Maybe she's like my grandmothers: women whose backs rounded with age. Years of working over the stove, or bending to play with children. Years of supporting their spouses and families. Maybe she suffered from what we would call Osteoporosis, her bones weakening — disintegrating — with time. Or, maybe the woman is a person whose sinews decided early-on to go their own way and invent a shape I cannot quite imagine: bent-over, and more. A female version of the “Hunchback.” My own imagining of this woman matches, for the most part, the woman on the cover of our bulletin. Older adult. Rounded shoulders. Bending back.

The thing of it is, this woman's crippled spirit and bent-over stature invite many other imaginings. I didn't come to this realization until I tried bending over — *with her*. As I rounded my own shoulders, my arms didn't hang limply at my sides. Instead, my arms moved to cover my chest, as if to protect my heart. My eyes moved downward, as if I felt ashamed or afraid. I understood my own version of the woman's crippled spirit. I felt quite sad. As an older adult? Maybe ... Like a “Hunchback?” Maybe ...

Maybe she is someone else ...

Maybe she's just eighteen, a teenager burdened by unbearable pressures. Her heavy backpack, a metaphor for other burdens in her life. A home in chaos. Parents struggling. Maybe she's afraid to go home? Maybe she wishes she were someone else.

Maybe this young woman lives in Nigeria. Taken captive by Boko Haram. Sold as a slave. Unnamed. Disappeared.

Maybe this one with a “crippled spirit” struggles with addiction. Unable to let go of the substance that relieved their pain, only now entrapped by a narrative of failure and shame.

Maybe the woman is a teacher or social worker, nurse, or librarian — a woman in the “historically feminized professions.”<sup>5</sup> Maybe she is one of many professionals without the needed resources to do her job. Spending her days rescuing children from behind broken bathroom doors instead of teaching them how to read. Maybe she is beholden to higher-ups who drive the system further down with more hurt than help.

And maybe this person with a crippled spirit is hiding from an abuser. Living at an undisclosed location. Praying a Protective Order keeps them safe.

Who is this person?

Scripture is a bit vague, and unexamined interpretations, a bit limiting. Still, this person becomes less and less difficult to see. This person is less and less difficult to know. Less and less difficult to be. She is, perhaps, the shadow within each one of us who is hurting, injured, or afraid.

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<sup>5</sup> Term from Carla Hayden, interviewed by Tom Hall on *Maryland Morning*. “Carla Hayden: New Librarian Of Congress Ponders Challenges Ahead, Her Legacy at Enoch Pratt.” By Tom Hall and Rob Sivak. August 15, 2016

She is the shadow inside us who carries heavy burdens, weighed-down by years in the making and a lifetime in the undoing. She is the shadow within each of us who has ever been overlooked, discounted, unheard. She is one within us — and among us. We, in fact, know this person. Aspects of her story still resonate.

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Something about her resonates with Jesus. Jesus sees her, he calls her, and he initiates an encounter between them. Scripture does not reveal much about the encounter or whatever process may have transpired.

Although Luke doesn't tell us exactly what happened between Jesus and the woman, generations later, an artist named Barbara Schwartz gives us an idea. Her painting of "Jesus and the Bent-over Woman" is reprinted on our bulletin cover.<sup>6</sup> In her interpretation, we can begin to see and to know what might have happened. Jesus bends to the woman's level, and they look one another in the eyes. It is the attitude of compassion.

It seems important to Jesus to connect with the woman. It seems natural, as if they are already know one another deeply. Maybe he can identify with her hurting or fear. He understands heavy burdens. He gets what it's like to be discounted. Jesus and the woman connect.

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This story in Luke takes place shortly after a significant turn in the gospel narrative. Luke, chapter nine (only a few chapters before the one in which our story appears), is ominous. "Herod the ruler" becomes perplexed as Jesus' reputation and power increase. Jesus "withdraws privately ... and prays alone." Peter identifies Jesus as "The Messiah," and Jesus "sternly" orders and commands his disciples "not to tell anyone." Instead, he urges his followers to "take up their cross and follow."

Jesus goes to a mountaintop where he is transfigured. And again, he tells his disciples "keep silent." He anticipates he will "be betrayed into human hands" and everyone is "afraid to ask him about" it. Then Luke says of Jesus, "When the days" draw "near for him to be taken up, he set[s] his face to go to Jerusalem." And so begins a spiritual and geographic journey, recorded by Luke alone, in chapters ten through twenty-one of his gospel.

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Early in this journey, Jesus and the woman in our story connect. Her spirit — and his — resonate. The light and the rounded, soft hues of Sister Barbara's painting tell us, something miraculous occurs. Jesus bends to the woman's level, and they engage eye-to-eye. Jesus sees her, he acknowledges her, and he knows her. He understands the suffering, and he has compassion.

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<sup>6</sup> Barbara Schwarz, OP, "Jesus and the Bent Over Woman," acrylic on canvas, 2014. In *National Catholic Reporter: Global Sisters' Report*. April 23, 2014.

As Jesus' back bends here, it prefigures the bend in his back when he reaches his journey's end.<sup>7</sup> In Jerusalem (the geographic and spiritual place toward which he has set his face), Jesus bends to the authority of the guards who come to arrest him. He bends to the governor and king who interrogate him, and to the soldiers who torture and mock him. Jesus bends to take the cross and carry it.

He carries the cross on his back through the streets of town to where he is crucified. And on the cross, he cries, "Why have you forsaken me?" Spirit crippled, back broken: Jesus dies.

Jesus is later buried, and the Apostles' Creed tells us, Jesus descends into hell. It is an uncomfortable phrase in the creed that points to an existential reality. It is a hell of pain, of injury, and fear. It is a hell of heavy burdens, years in the making and lifetimes in their undoing. It is a hell of invisibility, the hell of being discounted. Jesus connects with the woman. He imagines her hell and takes it into himself. From this death, he rises.

And as for the woman, Luke says, she stands "straight" and is "set free."

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She is "set free" as this summer of standing tall nears its end. Jesus and the woman seem not unlike like the world's fastest man running as a guide alongside a Paralympic champion who is blind. They are connected. The woman who stands seems not unlike the gold-star mother, Mrs. Kahn, who holds her ground on an international stage. How incongruous — in a way. Her silence, and her husband's speech. The blind runner and the world's fastest man. In another way, this summer would be incomplete without them — people who stand tall and are "set free."

A few months ago, the story of an aspiring Olympic swimmer from Stanford and an unnamed young woman riveted the country's attention. A devastating event crippled the young woman's spirit. She almost disappeared out of sight, behind a dumpster in the dark of night. She was crumpled in a heap and "quite unable to stand up straight." Two Swedes on bicycles saw her — and thanks to their compassion, she is now able to stand tall.

On Thursday June 3rd, a statement the young woman had written was reprinted in the news.<sup>8</sup> It begins, "you don't know me." And then, by her powerful statement, we do. The statements ends in this way: "To girls everywhere," the young woman says, "I am with you.

On nights when you feel alone,  
I am with you.

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<sup>7</sup> *cf.* Luke 22-23. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

<sup>8</sup> *cf.* [https://www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra?utm\\_term=.eq14navbj#.hjqY2D6Ee](https://www.buzzfeed.com/katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra?utm_term=.eq14navbj#.hjqY2D6Ee). In response to the woman's statement, Vice-President Joe Biden wrote an open letter. For the text of his letter, see [https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomnamako/joe-biden-writes-an-open-letter-to-stanford-survivor?utm\\_term=.he0VexrX4#.feKw681qN](https://www.buzzfeed.com/tomnamako/joe-biden-writes-an-open-letter-to-stanford-survivor?utm_term=.he0VexrX4#.feKw681qN).

When people doubt you or dismiss you,  
I am with you.

I [fight] everyday for you.  
So never stop fighting.

In this woman's voice — the voice that says, "I am with you" — I hear the voice of God.

She goes on to say:

I believe you. [And] I hope that by [my Word],

you absorbed a small amount of light ...  
and a big, big knowing that you are important,

[you are important] unquestionably,

you are untouchable, you are beautiful,  
you are to be valued, respected, undeniably, every minute of every day,  
you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you.

In this voice — the voice that says, "I believe you" — I hear the voice of God.

I hear the voice of God speaking still:

to girls and boys and men and women ...  
to the bent-over ones, and the ones crippled in spirit ..  
to the shadows within us, and the people among us ...

in Philadelphia and Cleveland and Baltimore,  
in Rio and Nigera and Stanford,  
in shelters and homes and schools and places everywhere,

God says: "I am with you."

And we are set free to stand tall.