Stand Tall in God's Grace
Luke 13:10–17

I once heard someone say, "The most spiritual place in town isn't the church—it's the chiropractor's office." Why would they say that? Because that's where people come in bent over, and then walk out standing tall, saying, "Oh, thank you, Lord!"

Now of course, that's not the same as what Jesus did. But it does make a point. Every one of us knows what it feels like to be weighed down. Sometimes it's our back, sometimes it's a failure we can't shake, a broken relationship, or even the sting of discrimination.
Today's scripture is about the One who lifts us up when we can't lift ourselves—the One who helps us stand tall again: Jesus.

Page One: Trouble in the Text – A Woman Bent Down

When Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, there was a woman who had been suffering for eighteen long years. The Bible says her back was bent, and she could not straighten up at all.

Now, even a few days of back pain can make life miserable. But eighteen years? Imagine what her life must have been like. Every morning she woke up, but she never saw the sky. She met people, but she could never look them in the eye. The only world she saw was the ground, the dust, and people's feet. Her body was bent over, yes—but so were her perspective and her spirit. What a painful life that must have been.

And her suffering wasn't only physical. The law didn't classify her condition as an "unclean disease," but in that culture, people often believed long-term illness or disability was the result of sin, punishment, or even a curse from God. So how do you think others treated her? Maybe in public they offered words of sympathy, but behind her back they whispered, "She must be cursed. She must be a sinner." And those cold stares and whispered judgments became another heavy weight on her shoulders. The sickness bent her down, but the shame and stigma kept her down.

Page Two: Trouble in the World – Systems That Keep People Bent Down

Our world today isn't so different. Two thousand years have passed, but oppression and discrimination still keep so many people from standing tall.

Take people with disabilities. Discrimination hasn't gone away. Some even hold a twisted faith that sees disability as the result of sin. I've heard Christians say to parents of a child with a disability, "What did you do wrong for this to happen?" Can you imagine? As if the struggle of living with disability wasn't heavy enough, people add another layer of pain—prejudice and shame that drive people deeper into despair.

The poor carry similar burdens. Instead of lifting them up, society often brands poverty as shameful, a mark of failure. I was talking with Carl Bishop last Sunday about his trip to Italy. He noticed something striking in Florence—there were no homeless people on the streets. Was it because life there was so easy? No. The government simply moved them out of sight so tourists wouldn't see them. That's not helping the poor rise—that's hiding their suffering. And we see the same in America. In Washington, D.C., there have been attempts to "fix" homelessness by pushing people away. Not solving poverty, but treating poor people themselves as the problem. That, too, is oppression.

And then there are immigrants. At a gathering of sanctuary churches, I heard the story of a young woman whose brother was badly injured in a car accident. But the family didn't call the police. Why? Because they were undocumented, and they feared deportation. The driver walked away, and the family was left with huge medical bills. For four months, they lived on canned food alone. And today, immigration raids even happen in hospitals, schools, churches, and courthouses. So immigrants who are sick avoid hospitals, and even stay away from churches where they could find comfort.

This is the world we live in—a world where the weak are forced to stay bent down. The burdens are heavy: the burden of illness, of poverty, and of discrimination. Too many weights press down on us and on our neighbors.

Page Three: Grace in the Text – Jesus Liberates

The good news of the gospel is this: the heavy burdens that weigh us down are not the end of our story. There is One who sees our pain. And who is that? Jesus. Verse 12 says, *"When Jesus saw her, he called her over."* That word "saw" is important. In Greek, it doesn't just mean a quick glance—it means to notice with care, to see with deep concern. Jesus didn't just catch sight of her; he truly saw her. And friends, when someone really sees your pain and your life, that alone can bring incredible comfort and strength.

Henri Nouwen once shared a story from his time at the L'Arche community, where people with and without intellectual disabilities live together. One day, a woman named Janet came up to him and said, "Henri, will you bless me?" So, as a priest, he made the sign of the cross on her forehead. But Janet shook her head and said, "No, that's not it. I want a real blessing." But he couldn't understand what a real blessing mean.

Later that evening, during worship, Henri announced, "Janet has asked for a blessing." Janet jumped up and cried out, "Yes! I want a blessing!" She walked over, laid her head against his chest, and waited. In that moment, Henri spontaneously wrapped his arms around her, looked into her eyes, and said, "Blessed are you, Janet. You know how much we love you. You know how important you are. You know what a good woman you are." Suddenly, her face lit up. She said, "Yes, yes! I know." It was as if new life returned to her. Others in the community began calling out, "I want that kind of blessing, too!"[1] Because when someone truly sees us—our pain and our worth—it brings healing. That is how Jesus sees us.

When Jesus saw the woman who had suffered for eighteen years, he called her forward. Remember—in that time, women had very limited roles in the synagogue. Someone like her—sick, marginalized, pushed to the background—would never be called to the front. But Jesus did exactly that. It was radical. It was disruptive. And when she came forward, Jesus said, *"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."* Immediately she was healed. She stood up straight and began to praise God!

But notice—this is more than a story about one woman's back being healed. Jesus was also breaking the chains of the system that had kept her down. Not everyone rejoiced. The synagogue leader was angry and said, *"There are six days for work. Come to be healed then, not on the Sabbath!"* Imagine that—using the law to restrict even acts of love and mercy. Sadly, that sounds all too familiar.

But Jesus would not stay silent. He said, *"Don't you untie your ox or donkey on the Sabbath to give it water? Then shouldn't this woman—a daughter of Abraham, bound for eighteen long years—be set free on the Sabbath?"*

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[1] https://fscaston.org/219325-2/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Do you hear it? Jesus wasn't just healing her body. He was breaking the chains of oppression—religious, social, spiritual. And he restored her dignity by calling her a *daughter of Abraham.* She wasn't just standing tall physically—she was standing tall as a beloved child of God.

Page Four: Grace in the World – The Gospel Liberates

Friends, today's story is not just about a woman from two thousand years ago. We all carry heavy burdens that keep us from standing tall—the burden of sickness, the burden of failure, the weight of racism, the struggles of simply living. These loads can push us down, keeping our eyes on the ground.

But hear the good news: Jesus still sees us. And Jesus still speaks: *"Daughter of God, Son of God—you are set free from what binds you!"* I pray that this word of liberation is spoken into your life today, and that you will live in the freedom Christ gives.

That is what the church is meant to be—a community of the set free. Just as Jesus saw, called, and healed the woman, we too are called to see those the world overlooks. The church must be the place where we look people in the eye and say, *"You are God's beloved child."* A place where blessing is spoken, dignity is restored, and sacred worth is affirmed. When we notice one another's burdens, when we lift each other up, then the church becomes a true community of liberation.

Beloved, just as Jesus raised up the woman, we too are called to stand tall in God's grace. This week, I invite you first to lift your head and look to heaven, saying: *"I am a child of God."* And when you meet someone who is bowed down, look them in the eye and say: *"You are a beloved child of God."* And as we live this way together—welcoming the weak, the immigrant, the outcast—our church will stand tall in the world as a living witness to the gospel. Amen.