

August 14, 2016



## "Stand Tall!"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

I imagine that many of us have been watching the Olympic Games from Rio de Janeiro and marveling at the amazing athleticism of so many skilled participants from around the world. Our spirits have been lifted especially by the presence, for the first time, of the Team of Refugee Olympic Athletes, young people who have fled impossible situations of war and violence and are now country-less. In Rio they have been given status and recognition, with the intent to not only applaud their endurance and their gifts, but to call attention to the plight of the more than 65 million refugees around the world. These Olympic games have lifted them up and reminded us all that numbers and statistics must never erase human names and stories and each person's potential for greatness.

And towering over Rio, night and day, is the iconic statue of Cristo Redentor, Christ the Redeemer. Arms outstretched to embrace the world. Thirty-eight meters in height. 28 meters across. Weighing almost 1200 tons. The art deco Christ is composed of reinforced concrete, stone and small mosaic pieces. 83 years of exposure to the elements has taken a toll, especially the frequent lightning strikes that in recent years have become more frequent and more intense. A fingertip missing. Scorch marks on the back of the head. Erosion of patches of concrete. A phenomenal team of workers is on duty nearly year 'round, climbing up the interior of the statue to emerge on the shoulders, tethered, climbing out on the arms, propelling down the torso, to make the needed repairs.

And still Christ stands, the Risen Christ having himself become the cross, according to the designer, his outstretched arms signifying the redemption of all humankind at the crucifixion. Outstretched arms of welcome, of expansive love. If now the statue itself suffers still, Christ the Redeemer triumphs over all and invites each and every child of God to stand tall, to embrace life itself, and to extend God's welcoming love far and wide.

Stand tall, it says, to the refugees and all the athletes from every nation. Stand tall, it says, to the poor of the favelas of Rio. Stand up, it says to all Brazil, mired in a chaotic political morass and a void of leadership. Stand up, reach out, it says, to a world united, as in all Olympic Games, in our common, deep hope for peace.

This Christ the Redeemer is who we see in Jesus in today's story from Luke's Gospel, commonly known as the "Story of the Bent-Over Woman." But that's just where the story begins, not at all where it ends. Do you know it? It's a short story, just seven verses. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath. And there appeared a woman crippled for eighteen years. And though she must have been a familiar sight to all of them—eighteen years is a long time—the others had grown so used to her that they no longer saw her at all. They made her invisible. But she kept coming back to that sacred space, longing for a healing far beyond the limits of what seemed rationally possible for her.

Over and over again, the bent-over woman of today's story found her way back to this place where God's people gathered. She was not even important enough for us to be told her name, was unimportant in the eyes of society. Just another somebody who could be looked over and over-looked. But not by Jesus. From the back, where she "belonged," he calls her right up to the front of the synagogue, the part of the sacred space where women weren't supposed to be. He calls her up on the Sabbath, and breaking all taboos, he blesses her.

"Woman," he says, "you are set free from your ailment." And he reached out to her, laid his hands on her—something else he wasn't supposed to do—and he healed her with his touch. And immediately she stood up straight and tall and began praising God. And when the leader of the synagogue became indignant that Jesus had done this work on the Sabbath day, Jesus dismisses his complaint by saying "she deserves this, for she is a daughter of Abraham."

"A daughter of Abraham"? In all of Scripture, those words had never been uttered. Until that very moment on that Sabbath day, there were no "daughters of Abraham," only sons, and the leaders of the synagogue, and all the men up in the front, found their very identity in that name. To be a son of Abraham was to have a place amongst God's people, to have a history, a story, a relationship with God. "Sons of Abraham" were God's covenant people, but now, according to Jesus, there are daughters in the covenant, too.

Jesus refused to see this woman only as "a bent-over woman," or as someone needing healing on the God-forbid Sabbath, or even as someone asking him to break the rules to help her. Jesus didn't objectify her in any way. He didn't distance himself from her. He saw her for who she was—a beloved child of God. Stand tall, he said. As straight and tall as Christ the Redeemer.

A few weeks ago, we lost one among us who showed through her life's work what it looks like to see every one as a beloved child of God and assist them to stand tall. Mollie Lowery died at age 70 working to the end to serve the homeless throughout the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. Studying to become a Catholic nun at an early age, she discerned that that life was not her calling. Instead, she was drawn to the streets and to the people so many would cast aside or

choose not to see. I count it as a privilege to have known her and to have worked with her through the then Interfaith Hunger Coalition.

As Steve Lopez wrote in his column about her in the LA Times: “[Mollie Lowery] was determined to do, as she put it, whatever it takes, for as long as it takes, to help homeless people -- especially those with severe mental illness -- rebuild their lives.”

Mollie grew up in the San Fernando Valley, and first worked here in Santa Monica at OPCC, the Ocean Park Community Center founded by our United Methodist Church in Ocean Park. A few years later, she became a co-founder of LAMP, the Los Angeles Men’s Project, build around the philosophy that every person was to be treated with dignity. As Lopez put it: “She would work for as long as it took to earn a person’s trust, knowing that people with nowhere to live are often driven into isolation by illness, stigmatization and the instinct to self-medicate their psychological pain. She would offer food, clothing, a bed, a shower and friendship. And once she earned someone’s trust, she and her staff would provide housing, treatment and ongoing care.”

“Lowery never gave up on anyone. She understood the complexities of mental illness, poverty, homelessness and public policy measures to address all those things. And she was a no-nonsense, impatient critic of policymakers, saying that for all the hand-wringing and blue-ribbon studies, [the solution was pretty simple in the end](#). More housing for sick, poor people, and more continuing support for those in need.”

It’s hard to weigh the impact of any one person’s life, but I know for sure that Mollie Lowery’s tireless advocacy assisted many in standing tall and has left a lasting legacy in programs and policies relating to those among us who are homeless. The witness of her life asks a question of all of us today: “Who, in your world, needs the same encouragement to stand tall?” No matter who we are, there are people around us who long for a sense of this love for them. There are people we meet every day who are hungry for forgiveness and hope. There are people who are dying to be set free from something keeping them bent-over and weighed down. There are people who long to know that their life has some meaning, that no matter what their circumstance, they are known and cherished by God.

Who are they? A homeless family, a bullied kid, someone bent over by grief or loneliness? Someone bent over by fear, sorrow, self-doubt, shame, tough luck?

Who, in your corner of this great big beautiful world, is bent over and needs the embracing love of God to restore dignity and wholeness and a future with hope?

How will we use the faith, the love, the power we have been given, to touch the lives of others and witness to Christ’s healing love? How will we be the hands and feet and presence of Christ for all those, as the poet sang, “beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way, with painful steps and slow?”

The “Story of the Bent-over Woman” is much better called the “Story of the Freed Raised-Up Woman.” For in Jesus Christ she is raised up, as are we all, to stand tall and feel the gaze of God seeing us for who we are and loving us into wholeness. Freed to claim healing for whatever has bent us over and kept our eyes and hearts glued to the floor. Freed to be strong enough to open our eyes and see the needs of the world around us and reach out. Freed to open our arms wide and dare to embrace the whole of this world and to let the love of God flow through us.

We are all called to pay attention and whenever we see any child of God bent over, to reach out in love and through our words and actions and prayers and service invite them to again stand tall. There are children and youth who need to see that the future is bright and full of promise. There are people in our lives, in our community, at our place of work and in our schools who will leap with joy seeing even a small bit of courage and a willingness to stand for what is right and just and good.

For we serve a crucified and risen Savior, sent by God to raise us all up to the fullness of life in this world and the next. And we are embraced by the Beloved Son of God, Christ our Redeemer, who, though wounded and broken, stands tall, arms outstretched to embrace the whole world. AMEN

Notes:  
“Arms Wide Open.” BBC.com

Steve Lopez. “[Mollie Lowery, to the end, was a saint to those living on the streets.](#)” LA Times. July 25, 2016.

Edmund H. Sears. “It Came upon the Midnight Clear.”: 1849. UMH #218

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