

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 21, 2022

A Community of Dignity

Luke 13:10-17

When the worship leader said, "Let's stand and sing," it was always a challenging moment for her. Just getting up and onto her feet usually took a few moments. Then she would stabilize herself by gripping the pew in front of her or by leaning on her cane. By that point, the hymn of praise was already well underway. She usually relied more on the hymnal, simply because it was hard to lift her eyes far enough to see the lyrics on the screen.

But that's the way it was in so much of her life. She spent more of her time looking down than looking up. For 18 years, she had suffered from a spinal condition that kept her stooped over. And with this condition came all sorts of other complications. Pain in her neck and back, often shooting all the way down to her legs and feet. Heart problems related to inflammation of her aorta. Struggles to breathe. Difficulty speaking.

On top of the physical symptoms, she often struggled with a sense of isolation and loneliness. Even many in her own congregation kept their distance and didn't interact with her very much. And in the larger world beyond the walls of her house of worship, she was far down on society's pecking order. She wasn't prominent or influential. She had few possessions. She didn't get invited to gatherings where the healthy, the wealthy, and the wise would assemble to socialize and highlight their latest accomplishments. For this woman, just making it to church and back home would ordinarily be a major accomplishment.

But this particular trip to church would be far from ordinary. During the course of his Bible lesson, Jesus spotted this woman and asked her to come forward. Remember that she wasn't able to just spring up from her pew and stride swiftly to the front of the sanctuary. It took a while for her to get up and make her way, one painful step at a time, to where Jesus was standing. And even when she got there, our Lord's first act wasn't a matter of touch but of talk. First he pronounced a word of liberation: "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity" (v. 12). Then he put his hands on her. And the result Luke describes briefly and beautifully: "Immediately she straightened up and praised God" (v. 13).

By the power of God, she stood up straight. This is more than just physical restoration. What she has experienced through Jesus is part healing, part exorcism. Luke tells us that she had been "crippled by a spirit" (v. 10). So now, she isn't just better; She's free. She's no longer captive to Satanic forces that kept her bent over and bowed down. She's now released. And the first thing she does with her straightened spine is give praise to God. Now that she's more upright, she's able to take a deeper breath to energize her voice, as she shouts, Hallelujah! Immediately the whole congregation joins her in her celebration. Who wouldn't rejoice in such an act of deliverance?

Well, the head of the congregation for one. He makes what at first seems like a reasonable point. We're the people of God, and this day is devoted to God-honoring rest. There are six other days of the week when work ought to be done. This woman has been battling this

ailment for 18 years. Couldn't this cure have waited for just one more day? But Jesus says no, the freedom that comes with God's kingdom is so urgent it can't wait. Today is the day of her deliverance.

Now granted, Jewish teachers had varying interpretations of the Sabbath law. Many agreed that lifesaving intervention was permitted on the Sabbath. But there were divisions about whether healings from chronic conditions were forbidden on the day of rest. Jesus knows how these debates often work among the rabbis, so in this case he counters the head of the congregation by reasoning from the lesser to the greater. He says, "Think about it, many of you wouldn't hesitate to untie your ox or donkey and lead them to the watering trough on the Sabbath. So wouldn't you do more for this woman than you would for an animal? I mean, you unbind your livestock so they can get what they need, yet you object to a Sabbath miracle for this daughter of Abraham who has been bound by Satan for 18 years?"

Notice what Jesus just called her. "A daughter of Abraham." We know from what he declared earlier in Luke's Gospel that Jesus is in the business of releasing the captives and freeing the oppressed (4:18). He's raising up children to Abraham (3:8). These are children who will be part of God's purpose to bless all nations. And here is one of the daughters. For so much of her life, especially the last 18 years, she has been invisible, isolated, and on the margins of society. But now Jesus places her front and center. He removes the burden of her crooked back, enables her to stand up straight, and confers on her a status of dignity. "Daughter of Abraham."

As we proclaim and practice the kingdom of God in the contemporary world, our commission from Christ includes bringing restored dignity to the lives of others. I realize that the concept of human dignity is incredibly broad, and many people, along with many organizations, are devoted to promoting it. But as the church, the people of God in Christ, we have a gospel-centered, kingdom-grounded approach to the worth and value of all people.

I like the way that Daniel Darling has put it in his book, *The Dignity Revolution*, where he writes:

Imagine, for a moment, if God's people began to lead a new, quiet revolution whose foundation was a simple premise: every human being—no matter who they are, no matter where they are, no matter what they have done or have had done to them—possesses dignity, because every human is made in the image of God. By God's grace, our churches would change, and our communities would change.¹

John of Kronstadt was a nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox priest who served at a time when the streets were filled with poverty and crime. Theft, prostitution, and alcoholism were rampant. Most people who weren't part of that world didn't venture out into it, including many of the clergy. But John didn't wait for the people to come to him. He went to them. He developed a reputation among the people for how he would go out into the streets, find the most broken, disreputable individual, lift their face so they were looking directly into his eyes, and say, "This is beneath your dignity. You were meant to house the glory of the living God."²

As we follow Jesus into the world, especially to the places that have become invisible and to the people who are deemed insignificant, we ourselves need to reflect Jesus' own kingdom vision. In today's text, we recognize again how our Lord sees and cherishes those whom others might overlook. He spots them and speaks to them and touches them. He takes the woman with a bent back and blesses her, so that she may now also be a blessing to others.

Remember that for the past 18 years, not being able to stand up straight has meant that she has usually been unable to look people in the eyes. Her vision has been limited to the ground in front of her. But now her perspective has been expanded. Having been seen by the Lord, she herself can now see others in a new way.

Recall what Paul tells the Corinthians about the difference that Christ makes in the way that we view other people. "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer" (2 Cor. 5:16). People have value because Christ has died for them. The death of Jesus tells us what we need to know about how other people are treasured by God. And as we spread this good news and invite others to respond with faith in Christ, we help open their eyes to their preciousness and worth.

Pastor and author Eugene Peterson reflects on how easily we often overlook or ignore the people who are right in front of us. He writes:

Several years ago one of my students who lived a distance away and rode a crowded bus to the college each day said to his wife as he went out the door one morning, "I'm just going to go out and immerse myself in God's creation today." The next day his parting words were the same. On the third day, she called him back, "Don't you think you ought to go to class today? A couple of days walking in the woods or on the beach is okay, but don't you think enough is enough?"

He said, "Oh, I've been going to class every day."

"Then what," she said, "is all this business about immersing yourself in creation?"

"Well, I spend forty minutes on the bus each morning and afternoon. Can you think of a setting more thick with creation than that—all these people created, created in the image of God, created male and female?"

"I never thought of that," she said.

Peterson concludes, "[We need to embrace] the people around us with the same delight as we do the hawks soaring above us and the violets blooming at our feet. Men and women, children and the elderly, the beautiful and the plain, the blind and the deaf, amputees and paralytics, the mentally impaired and the emotionally distraught—each a significant and sacred detail of nature, of God's creation."³

May the Lord give you eyes to see others, especially those who are overlooked and invisible, as people made in his image and redeemed by him in Christ. And may he use you in his mission of giving a sense of dignity to others, particularly those who are neglected or on the margins of life. Preacher and teacher R. C. Sproul once told about a college student he taught who had cerebral palsy. Though he struggled with spastic movements and garbled speech, he was still a very bright and capable person. One day he came to Sproul vexed with a problem and asked for prayer. In the course of his prayer, Sproul said something like, "O God, please help this man as he wrestles with this problem." When he opened his eyes, the student was quietly weeping. When Sproul asked him what was wrong, he stammered a reply: "You called me a man. No one has ever called me a man before."⁴

Men, women, boys, girls. People of all ages. People at all stages. From the unborn in the womb to the aged one in their last days, all have dignity and value as image bearers, loved by God in Christ. Former archbishop of Canterbury Michael Ramsey wrote, "The glory of Christianity is its claim that small things really matter and that the small company, the very

few, the one man, the one woman, the one child are of infinite worth to God.”⁵ Jesus spotted one of them in the worship service that day. He straightened her back and enabled her to stand, with a renewed sense of dignity and belonging among a congregation of the people of God. A congregation like this gathering here today. An assembly of people who have been raised up by the mercy and power of God in Christ, and who are sent to see others, to serve others, and to show that Satan’s power is waning and on its way out. Here among us, in this community of dignity, may the Lord be praised, and may we delight in the wonderful things he is doing.

¹ Quoted by Jeffrey Brauch, “Is Your Notion of Human Dignity Too Narrow?” Christianity Today. August 17, 2018. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/august-web-only/dignity-revolution-daniel-darling.html> (August 17, 2022).

² Mark Buchanan, *Your Church Is Too Safe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 88-89.

³ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) n.p.

⁴ As told by Lee Eclov, in the sermon, “The Blessed Limp.” PreachingToday.com.

⁵ Quoted in Tish Harrison Warren, “Why We Preach for Proper Names.” Christianity Today. June 21, 2022. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2022/july-august/tish-harrison-warren-preaching-small-local-church.html> (August 18, 2022).