

THE HEALING POWER OF EMPATHY

The LAST person that Jesus heals during His ministry in Galilee, just BEFORE He heads for the Holy City of Jerusalem, where He will DIE, is this BENT-OVER woman in LUKE, chapter 13. And it's STRANGE, because we RARELY hear this text being PREACHED or TAUGHT. And SO, this bent-over woman has remained INVISIBLE to most of us for most of our LIVES. And that's TOO BAD, because the story of her HEALING is not only COMPELLING, but totally UNIQUE as well. Jesus says something to HER that He says to NO one ELSE in the gospels.

Now, the SETTING for this story is an UNIDENTIFIED town in GALILEE. We know it's a Saturday morning, because the people have gathered to celebrate the SABBATH. And because JESUS is in town, they have invited HIM to be their GUEST teacher. Now, we know the bent-over woman comes LATE to the synagogue because Jesus has already begun teaching, but I suspect that she comes LATE on PURPOSE, MAYBE so that she won't get STARED at -- or RIDICULED. And sure enough, NOBODY seems to NOTICE that she's even there. OH, they might look OVER at her, but nobody really SEES her. She is one of those INVISIBLE people, you see.

Well, even though Jesus is speaking, and she is WAY in the back of the synagogue, Jesus DOES see her. And MORE than that, He EMPATHIZES with her struggle. He has COMPASSION. Now, the word *compassion* LITERALLY means *to suffer WITH* someone. SO, Jesus CALLS her to come forward, and SLOWLY, she walks past the crowd of WOMEN who are required to stand in the BACK of this holy assembly. SLOWLY, she walks past the SCREEN, through which NO woman is EVER allowed to PASS. And SLOWLY, she KEEPS walking, RIGHT up to the FRONT of the synagogue, as Jesus patiently WAITS. And AS she walks forward, all of a sudden, MANY begin to SEE her in a new LIGHT. Suddenly, she's no longer INVISIBLE, and they begin to EMPATHIZE with her PAIN.

And THEN, Jesus says to her something that He says to no one ELSE in the gospels. He says: *Woman, you are SET FREE from your ailment.* Notice that He DOESN'T say: *You are HEALED of your ailment.* He does NOT use the GREEK word, *therapuo*, which means *to HEAL a disease*, and FROM which WE get our word, *THERAPY*. Instead Jesus says: *Woman, you are SET FREE from your ailment.* He uses the Greek word, *APOLUO*, which means *to set FREE from captivity, or to LIBERATE*. And MAYBE, in the process, Jesus does something UNEXPECTED. MAYBE He gets down on His knees and LOOKS at this woman, EYEBALL to EYEBALL. And maybe He puts his HANDS on her HEAD, and AS He DOES, BOTH of them begin to RISE UP together. And AS she begins to stand up straighter and taller, the eyes of the entire congregation are FIXED on HER. Finally, after 18 YEARS of living her life BENT-OVER, this woman NOW stands tall and free! And she can't CONTAIN herself! She shouts: *HALLELUJAH! HALLELUJAH! Praise be to God! Surely God has VISITED us today in this MAN of Galilee!* Yes, this BENT-OVER woman has been suddenly set FREE! And the WHOLE congregation begins to REJOICE with her, because in a sense, they've ALL been set FREE! And THAT'S because they have EMPATHIZED with this poor woman, so that THEY too have had an ENCOUNTER with the Lord of LIFE. And friends, THAT is the HEALING power of EMPATHY. Empathy allows us ALL of us to have an ENCOUNTER with the Lord of LIFE. Empathy, you see, CONNECTS us with each other's SUFFERING, with each other's JOY, AND with each other's HEALING. And that's why, in the church, EMPATHY ought to be a KEY component. We OUGHT to be SUFFERING with those who suffer, and REJOICING with those who rejoice, as St. Paul said. THAT'S empathy!

One of the reasons I GO on mission trips and encourage YOU to go on them as well is because they TEACH empathy. This summer in Ecuador, I kept ASKING myself: *I wonder what would happen if ALL of us could truly EMPATHIZE, if ALL of us could truly FEEL, not only our OWN pain and suffering, but the pain and suffering of ALL humankind. I WONDER what would HAPPEN.* Well, there's a CLASSIC science fiction novel by Arthur Clarke entitled, *Childhood's END*. And IN this story, Clarke envisions a time when the Overlords come down to earth to prepare it for the NEXT stage of human EVOLUTION. Well, BEFORE this evolution can take place, the world HAS to be REFORMED and IMPROVED. Such cruelties as BULLFIGHTING, for example, need to be ENDED. And SO, the Overlords WARN the people INVOLVED in bullfighting that they MUST stop this barbaric sport. But they REFUSE! SO, the next Sunday, a SPACESHIP appears over the largest BULLRING in Madrid. And when the first PIC is thrust into the bull's shoulder, a piercing, agonizing SCREAM arises from the entire AUDIENCE. The OVERLORDS, you see, have caused EVERY person in the CROWD to actually FEEL the pain EXACTLY as the BULL feels it. SO, there is a SCREAM, and of course, BULLFIGHTING comes to an END.

Well, WHAT if such a thing were possible TODAY? What if EACH and every ONE of us could actually FEEL the FEELINGS, could actually EXPERIENCE the PAIN of ALL humanity, simultaneously and with FULL force? Well FIRST, I think, there would be the most TERRIBLE and prolonged scream of ANGUISH! THEN, there would be something even MORE awesome: there would be a SHOCK of RECOGNITION. We would ALL suddenly REALIZE that WE have already FELT it somehow. Somewhere deep WITHIN us, however VEILED it might be, ALL of us KNOW the deep pain and agony of ALL humankind. In fact, it pervades our very BEING. BUT: UNACKNOWLEDGED, and struggling for release, this common consciousness of humanity just EXHAUSTS our energies and NUMBS our perceptions. But WHEN we ALLOW ourselves to actually FEEL it, and EXPERIENCE it, it can bring us an amazing CLARITY.

And WHEN this clarity COMES, SO do the TEARS, just as they did for ME after we left that BARRIO of Guasmo in Guayaquil, Ecuador, & that beautiful, loving FAMILY, with whom we lived. I just couldn't help it! I felt totally OVERWHELMED. And SO, I believe that if ALL of us could FEEL it at ONCE: then AFTER the scream of anguish, and AFTER the shock of recognition, ALL the world would begin to WEEP. And we would WEEP not JUST for all the needless TORTURE and bombings, pain and poverty, injustice and oppression, hatred and warfare and violence that seem to CONTINUALLY plague this world, but we would ALSO weep for all of the MOMENTS that we have WASTED, all the BEAUTY we have overlooked, ALL the potential we have never REALIZED, all the WORDS that remain unspoken, ALL the painful confrontations that have been eternally POSTPONED, all the FATHERS and MOTHERS who have fallen with their SECRETS locked in their dying hearts, and all the WALLS between us that we have FAILED to tear DOWN. And feeling ALL of this ANGUISH, and so much MORE for which there are no WORDS, ALL the world would WEEP uncontrollably – maybe for a week, maybe for a month, or maybe for a YEAR. And IN this flow of tears, ALL humankind would KNOW, at last, the TRUE meaning of the FLOOD, the true MEANING of that universal and saving catastrophe, which was NOT the END, but rather the BEGINNING of the world.

And AFTER the flood of TEARS, there would be JOY, AS there was for ME in Ecuador after my tears. WE would feel a simple, matter-of-fact JOY of existence. Our tears of LOSS and PAIN would turn into tears of JOY. WHY? Well, we would REALIZE that BEYOND all the PAIN, and BEYOND all of our man-made WALLS, there is ALWAYS and FOREVER an elemental, all-pervasive SPIRIT of LOVE, who is GOD. And WHENEVER we make CONTACT with that eternal SPIRIT -- as they DID on that day in the synagogue in Galilee, and which happens

to US whenever we TRULY empathize with another human being -- WHENEVER we truly EXPERIENCE the PAIN of another human being, it SEEMS like a MIRACLE happens. But ONCE the miracle is REALIZED, we suddenly KNOW that it's NOT really SPECIAL at all. In fact, it's NOTHING out of the ordinary. Indeed, it's at the very HEART of our existence, our ONENESS with God and with one another. But it's HEALING, SO healing that it FEELS like a MIRACLE!

Friends: THAT'S why we need to learn the ART of EMPATHY. We ALL do! We need to LEARN to let ourselves FEEL, we need to learn to CONNECT ourselves with the anguish and pain of others, even and ESPECIALLY our ENEMIES, because WHEN we DO, it CONNECTS us with the very HEART of GOD. And we find HEALING, both for ourselves AND for one another -- AND, in TIME, for this VERY broken world in which we live. And friends: THAT is the HEALING power of EMPATHY! And as I said: it's something that we ALL need to LEARN, both for the sake of our bent-over SELVES, AND for our bent-over WORLD. And while going off on Mission Trips HELPS us LEARN it in a very INTENSE and special way, we can ALSO learn it right here at HOME -- in our ordinary, everyday lives. We can learn it at work and at church, at school and in our volunteer work. And that's because EVERYWHERE we go, there are people who are suffering, people with whom we can EMPATHIZE.

And the BEAUTY of *Stephen Ministry* (which you KNEW I had to talk about eventually) is that it's ALL about EMPATHY. And these Stephen Ministers, whom we are about to RE-COMMISSION, are LEARNING, like FEW others in this congregation, the ART and the HEALING power of EMPATHY. And WHEN we NEED an empathetic EAR, for we all DO (and often, if we're honest about our needs) -- but WHEN we need an empathetic EAR, we will have the BLESSING of being able to CALL upon a Stephen Minister, a Christian FRIEND in our OWN church family, who will walk WITH us on our JOURNEY, who will walk WITH us amidst our pain, and who will SHARE with us the HEALING power of EMPATHY. Thanks be to GOD for the GIFT of *Stephen Ministry*. AND, my question to ALL of you is this: *HOW and WHERE will YOU learn the art of EMPATHY?* THINK about that, and PRAY about it. Amen.

I am indebted for parts of this sermon to Hope Douglas J. Harle-Mould, *From Your Ailment, You Are Freed!* Church Worship, July 1995 & to George Leonard's book, *Transformation*.