

Bent Over

I attended a college with a conservatory of music. The Conservatory Dean at the time was a remarkable piano professor named Emil Danenberg. He was born in Hong Kong of European parents and came to this country at age 9. By the time I knew him he was in his fifties, short and very bent over, so much so that he had to lean backwards in order to get his eyes where he could see people. He had a real tongue-twister of a disease called ankylosing spondylitis. It causes the vertebrae to fuse together so the spine can't move. Some scholars think that that's the disease that the woman in today's Gospel had. Whatever it was, when I picture her I think of Emil Danenberg.

The woman must have been a faithful Jew to keep attending the synagogue for eighteen years even though she was so bent over. She might have been shunned as a sinner, just like today, when people ignore those who are different or deformed. Disease and sin are still linked in many people's minds.

Jesus didn't make that connection. In the midst of his teaching, he spotted the woman and had compassion on her. To him the bent body was a kind of bondage and he wanted to loose her from that bond. So he called her to come forward and told her she was set free. He laid his hands on her and immediately she straightened up and began praising God. It was a glorious moment.

It was also the Sabbath day. The healing annoyed the leader of the synagogue. As far as he was concerned, healing people was work, and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. He was too wary to attack Jesus directly, however, so instead he attacked the crowd. "Don't come to be healed today!" he told them. Come on one of the six work days. Jesus immediately pointed out his hypocrisy. Basic needs of animals could be addressed on a Sabbath. Wasn't the need of this faithful daughter of Abraham worth more than animals? They were shamed them by his response, and rightly so.

It is a curious healing story. For one thing, the woman didn't ask to be healed. There's no indication that she attracted attention in any way other than being herself. She was distinctive, to be sure, but aren't we all? We are all unique children of God, each different in our own way. That's why it's always demeaning to say that all members of a group look alike. To God, we do not all look alike.

Another odd element is that a *spirit* had crippled her – presumably an evil spirit, because later Jesus says that Satan bound her for eighteen years. She was physically bent over, yes, but she was also carrying a heavy spiritual burden. Jesus set her free from both.

This story gives me hope, not because I am in physical or spiritual bondage, but because Jesus saw and loved her just as she was. In God's eyes, we are all considered to be persons worthy of notice. Just as she was a child of Abraham, we too are children of God – children by adoption, St. Paul would say, but children nonetheless.

As I learned more about Emil Danenberg, I discovered that he was bent over by choice. When his disease was first diagnosed, he was given two options. His spine could be fused in an upright

position, but then he would be unable to see the piano keys. His playing days would be over. Or he could have his spine fused in a position where he could see the piano, but he would never be straight again. The first time I heard him play I knew he had made the right decision. He was phenomenal. Even bent over, he toured the world and became so famous that his obituary appeared in *The New York Times*.

The woman in today's story had no choice about her future. She was just an ordinary person for whom Jesus did something extraordinary. She was like us, faithful people whom God loves. That means that Jesus will be doing something extraordinary for *you*. I can't wait to see what it will be.

[Pentecost 11: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17.]