**Luke 13:10-17**
**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

I have a very old and very wonderful friend in Cornwall, whose name is Barbara. She was already a widow when I got to know her well, and we bonded over gin and tonic while we were folding and stapling the church magazine. She was the first person I told when I decided to go forward to the selection process for ordination, and she learned how to use a computer specifically so that she could keep in touch by email and Skype when I went away to vicar school. Tangentially, she was married, until his death in 2005, to one of the local GPs who was, rather wonderfully, called Tony Blood. Dr Blood. But that is by the by. I thought of Barbara when I read the gospel for this morning, because, at 95, B is also bent pretty well double, though her intellect is every bit as sharp as it ever was.

The gospel story today is about ‘the bent over woman.’ That is an interesting way to be identified. She has no other name that we know - history named her, judged her and labelled her by her appearance… by what’s *wrong* with her…  by her condition.
So, the story tells us it is the Sabbath - the holy day; the Jewish people have congregated in the synagogue and Jesus is teaching.   And like every first century synagogue, the men are at the front and the women are at the back.  And somehow Jesus notices a latecomer; a woman - bent over, or in the Greek, 'bent double.' Now my Barbara would never be late for church, but this woman is probably used to slipping in late at the back, hoping to be unnoticed. She has been living with this condition for eighteen years and wants to be as unobtrusive as possible. Bent over and looking always at the ground. How must that feel? How much of what was going on around her had she missed in that time?

 And what is more, the story tells us she was crippled ‘by a spirit’. The significance of that phrase, I think, is just to tell us that she hadn’t always been bent double. There had been a time when she had been able to stand up straight and look people in the eye. Then something happened, after which she could no longer walk upright.

‘Crippled by a spirit’ implies that this ‘something’ has assumed power over her, effectively taken control of her life. And it is causing her to live life in a crippled state… as *less than*… it governs how she speaks, where and when she goes, how she acts, how she thinks of herself.
We don’t know what 'spirit' had crippled this woman. Something that had happened to her, either as a child or not until adulthood. Something that someone did to her perhaps: abuse or neglect; unhealthy homes or relationships. Traumas can make it difficult for those who have experienced them to move on. They cripple us and we are metaphorically if not physically bent over with pain or grief.
Don’t kid yourself that addictions didn’t exist in the first century either, though not the range of addictions present in our own society. And every time our behaviour is altered to accommodate an addiction, we are crippled by it just as surely as this bent-over woman was by her condition.

Remember we don’t know her name – she was identified only as the bent-over woman. And it becomes an accepted reality. Like: the fat one – or the workaholic – or the drunk one. The widow, the neurotic, the narcissist. And labels stick. Labels are very sticky. The power of any one of those spirits is immense.
And not only are we identified by the labels other people stick on us. We begin to identify ourselves by those labels too. And to be ashamed of them but at the same time unable to rewrite our own story. So we too spend our lives hunched over, unwilling to look people in the eye, can’t even look ourselves in the eye in the mirror, slipping in late and sitting at the very back.

This is the bent over woman. She is everyone who has ever struggled to rise above the pain of oppression and judgment from others… she is everyone who has struggled with illness, addiction, loss of value, loss of partner, or self-esteem or  innocence… she is everyone who has lived in a situation that is intolerable… everyone who has been told ‘you can't’ and believed it....

And as she makes her way to her seat that ordinary Sabbath morning, Jesus calls to her. And Jesus doesn’t shout out, ‘Hey, you! The cripple at the back!’… or any other label that she or anyone else has used to identify her. He calls her in a way that she knows beyond a shadow of doubt that he is talking to her...
He calls her ‘woman’ – we have only to think of: Woman, here is your son, right at the end of his life to know that. And being addressed in person, **as** a person, wakens something inside her; she remembers who she was before… She remembers her life before she took on the weight of the label. Whatever it was. Remembers how things were before whatever it was took her over.

And all that gives her the strength to make her way across the synagogue towards the one who has already given her her humanity back. Despite having to walk through the people who had forgotten her name and knew only her appearance.
And when she arrives at the feet of Jesus, she hears…’Woman, you are free from your ailment…. Woman, you are free from your oppression…. from judgment…. from shame…. Woman, you are no longer under the power of this thing that has controlled your life for so long… Free to be who you are, and not who others tell you you are. Free to love yourself, accept yourself… be affirmed… You are precious in God’s sight… And Jesus laid his hands on her and immediately she stood up straight, and began to praise God.

But most of us don’t like things we can’t explain. They make us feel powerless; defensive. And so it was with the leader of the synagogue: he saw the faces of the people around him, looking in amazement at what had just transpired, and he defaulted to rules. This is the wrong day for healing. You can’t just go round doing things like that on the Sabbath.

Notice that he didn’t deny the power of Christ- he didn’t deny the healing. A lot of the time, we’re a bit like that. Our heads might understand that God can do anything - we don’t deny outright the power in the room - but we want Jesus to do it according to our rules. In a way that doesn’t defy belief.

But look at how Jesus responds: he calls the leader of the synagogue a' hypocrite' – in fact he calls them all hypocrites - and then he turns to the woman, and he calls her 'daughter'…. He looks at the congregation, with their mouths and eyes wide and reminds them that this woman, the one they have made to feel 'less than,' for all these years, is as much a part of them as the leader of the synagogue is. He reminds them that the family of God is not about shaming people into community; nor pushing those who struggle to the outside of the circle. It is about reminding them to bring all those people – all people – to the source of the power; the one at the centre of who we are.

We all, to some extent, live 'bent double.'  Some bent-doubles are plain for all to see, and some are completely invisible to everyone except those who are suffering from them. But Jesus knows. And sees. And cares. Jesus calls not the labels, but the us inside. The us He always intended us to be. And often it is harder to hear Him calling us his beloved sons and daughters than it is to continue to hear the labels which bind and smother us. So we turn a deaf ear. We continue to behave bent-over, as it were.

When Jesus addresses the crowd, notice what he calls the spirit that has kept her crippled? He says, ‘this woman has been bound by Satan for 18 years!’  But the Greek word for Satan doesn’t translate as red bloke with horns – Satan simply means ‘accuser’. So we are left to consider: who is the accuser in this bentover woman’s story. And who the accusers are in our own stories. And to remember that the important thing is to stand up straight from now on.

**Amen**