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The Gospel of Luke
XLVII. The Mustard Seed and the Leaven
Luke 13:10-21

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One commentary I read on this passage came right to the point. The writer stated that, in that particular time and culture, *“being a woman and suffering from such a malady makes her an outsider on two counts.”*¹ An outsider on two counts. I remember my own mother, in her later years, experiencing something like that. I remember her talking about how isolated she felt after my father died. Most of her friends still had their husbands around – which, while her friends were so kind and caring towards her, still made her feel like an outsider at social gatherings. And then, as she got older, her rheumatoid arthritis not only bent her back like the woman in our story, but also stole from her the ability to speak in anything above a whisper. She never expressed it quite this way, but I think this is very much how she began to feel at her retirement community – again, very much like an outsider. Like she had once been somebody; and now, to most of the world, she had become a nobody.

But you don’t have to be old and bent over to feel that way. Adolescence – those alternatively wonderful and horrible years of youth – is, almost by definition, all about the struggle to feel like a somebody and not a nobody, to be an insider and not an outsider. We all go through it. But I was reading something the other day about Generation Z – roughly those who are between the ages of ten and twenty-five in our midst – reporting that they are experiencing those normal adolescent struggles ramped up by several degrees. Covid certainly didn’t help them in this. The article said that Generation Z, more so than previous adolescent cohorts, is struggling with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety.² Struggling along that path of discovering that they are a somebody and not a nobody.

But, in truth, you don’t have to be either old or young to know this struggle. This struggle to feel like we matter, to feel like we belong, that we are a somebody and not a nobody is one we can experience at any age. It affects us all, from time to time. Which is why I love the way our story this morning begins. How it begins tells us just so much about how it is between us and our Creator – tells us so much about His heart, and our place in it. Here’s this elderly woman, bent over, nobody paying any attention to her, nobody probably really even noticing her as she slowly moves to her seat in the synagogue – an outsider on two counts. But Jesus notices her. That’s what our story says right there at the start: *“When Jesus saw her . . .”*

When Jesus saw her. Meaning she was not a nobody to Him. To Jesus she wasn’t a nobody – she was a somebody. Somebody whom He noticed, somebody whom He valued, somebody who mattered to Him, somebody whom He loved. And here’s the good news of the Gospel for us all –

whether we are fifteen, fifty, or eighty-five: nobody is a nobody to Jesus. We are all somebody to Him. We are seen. And we are treasured like the apple of His eye.³ And we matter to Him. Always. He thinks we are important and special – and for that very reason, if for nothing else, we most definitely are. And without any conditions or preconditions. That’s the first thing this story teaches us. Nobody is a nobody to Jesus. He sees us. We matter to Him. He cares about us, each one of us. We are all a somebody special to Him.

A woman tells of how, during her teenage years, she was plagued with outbreaks of serious acne. She was remembering how, one morning, because of this, she was in deep anguish over having to go to school. Her father, seeing her anguish, asked her if he could teach her a new way to wash her face. He led her to the bathroom, turned on the water. Then, leaving over the sink, he began splashing water onto his face. And he said to her, “*On the first splash, say, ‘In the name of the Father’; on the second splash say, ‘In the name of the Son’; and on the third splash, say, ‘In the name of the Holy Spirit.’*” Then, he said to her, “*Then, look up into the mirror and remember that you are a child of God, full of grace and beauty.*”⁴ We should all do that, I think. Because nobody is a nobody to Jesus. He sees us. And we are somebody to Him. We are always somebody important and special and unique and beautiful and valuable and worthwhile to Him. He sees us.

But there’s even more here than that:

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.

Immediately she was made straight. It’s a picture, a parable, of our salvation. The salvation Jesus has come to work in us – the full measure of His grace operating in our souls and bodies – isn’t just that we are seen and loved. And it isn’t just that we are forgiven for our sins, with a place now prepared for us in heaven. The salvation Jesus has come to work in us – the full measure of His grace operating in our souls and bodies – is that He should also make us able to stand up straight again. Restore us to our original and rightful posture before God and before the world. He intends to straighten us up again – transform us, recreate us, until we are the persons He always meant for us to become. No longer, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Galatians, no longer bent over by the damaging weight of “*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these.*”⁵ No longer bent over by all the things which can and do can wrong in us. But now, through the grace of Jesus operating in our souls and bodies, we made able to stand up straight and tall before God and before our fellow human beings, free of those sinful burdens and now infused and empowered by the Christ-imparted fruits of the Spirit: “*Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*” “*She was made straight, and she glorified God.*”⁶

Irenaeus, one of the great teachers of the early church, puts it this way:

For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is

*made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God.*⁷

Or, as another translation of that same quote has it: *“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”* The glory of God is a human being fully alive. *“She was made straight and she glorified God.”* He didn’t just straighten out her spine, He straightens our souls. That’s what His grace, His salvation seeks to do in us all: to make us fully alive through all the good things His grace begins in us and through us – that we too should bring glory to God. And not just with our words, but simply with our very existence.

Presbyterian pastor Donald McCullough tells of a time in his life when he had made some particularly bad choices – choices that had cost him his reputation, his career, and his marriage. While still reeling beneath the shattering consequences of those bad choices, he decided one day to get out of the house and go for a run on the beach – something he had not done in a while. And as he was running on the sand, suddenly it began to seem to him like God was suddenly all around him – in the wind and waves, in the sand and in the shouts of the children playing. He felt like his lungs were just opening up as he breathed in the air, pulling in not only fresh air, but also pulling in the possibility of his life being renewed, of a new and better life – like a trapped miner just rescued from a mine or a drowning man just revived. He felt himself being filled to overflowing with the gracious love and mercy of God – something that he had feared he had lost in all of his bad choices. And standing there on the beach, he felt Jesus calling to him all over again: *“Follow me.”* He tried to pray in response, but all that would come out, just over and over, was, *“Thank you, thank you, thank you.”*⁸

“When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, ‘Woman, you are freed from your disability.’ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.” The leader of the synagogue, watching all this, then jumped all over Jesus for doing this healing on the Sabbath Day, and in the synagogue no less. He yells at the congregation, but the real target of his anger is obvious – he is furious that Jesus had violated the God-given prohibition against work on the Sabbath. I love how Eugene Peterson translates these verses in The Message:

The meeting-place president, furious because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the congregation, “Six days have been defined as work days. Come on one of the six if you want to be healed, but not on the seventh, the Sabbath.

But Jesus shot back, “You frauds! Each Sabbath every one of you regularly unties your cow or donkey from its stall, leads it out for water, and thinks nothing of it. So why isn’t it all right for me to untie this daughter of Abraham and lead her from the stall where Satan has had her tied these eighteen years?”

*When he put it that way, his critics were left looking quite silly and red-faced. The congregation was delighted and cheered him on.*⁹

In other words, as Peterson's translation makes clear, the synagogue leader had missed the whole point of what he had just seen Jesus doing. In his zeal to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath, all he saw was a violation of the Sabbath – He was completely blind to the fact that the Lord of the Sabbath had just done something spectacularly good and wonderful on the Sabbath. That Jesus had just done something pointing to what the Sabbath day is supposed to be all about: the Kingdom of God breaking into this world to make all things new, to make all things good, to make all things whole, to make all creation able to sing to the glory of God. Seeing, the synagogue leader had not seen – to use a prophetic expression Jesus Himself once quoted.

Which is why, I think, Jesus then tells those two parables which follow – about the mustard seed and the leaven. Jesus addressed the synagogue leader and the congregation, saying, “*What is the kingdom of God like?*” And what I hear Him saying, in effect, is, “Let me give you some instructions on how to successfully see the Kingdom when it makes itself manifest in your midst.” “Let me give you a clue, so that seeing you will actually be able to see the Kingdom right in front of your face.” And then He tells the two parables. About how a tiny, tiny mustard seed becomes a great big tree, in which the birds of the air can make their nests. And about how a little pinch of leaven, blended into even a great big pile of dough, can make all that dough rise and become bread.

He is saying to the synagogue and to us all that if we want to know what the Kingdom of God coming on this earth looks like – and if we want to be able to recognize it when it appears in our midst – then we have to understand that it is most often to be seen in small things, easily overlooked. Like when an elderly woman, bent over – a nobody in the eyes even of her own community – is suddenly acknowledged as a somebody in the eyes of the God, and has her back is straightened by that same power which seeks to make us all fully alive, standing upright in a posture of holiness and spiritual and relational health. That this is how and when His Kingdom comes in our midst – one life at a time. And that this is how His Kingdom can be found: whenever and wherever we see grace, God's grace, claiming us, straightening us, enlivening us or someone in our midst.

Though, to the world, even that may look like nothing more than a mustard seed. A pinch of leaven. Easily overlooked. Easily dismissed. Easily considered to be trivial and powerless in a world that equates worth with size and importance with fame. George Buttrick, one of the great preachers of an earlier age, once observed that, “*We are victimized by bigness*”¹⁰ – by our sense that only the large and the loud things on this earth matter. Paul Scherer, another great preacher of that earlier age, put it this way:

You see, when we talk of power we think of clenched fists and rude shoulders pushing. And God thinks of quiet things; things that aren't at all spectacular: like the slow swing of the stars and the long, smooth roll of the sea. We just haven't calculated the terrifying might of His Spirit, staying on and on as it does in the world, until all the ribald laughter dies, and the shouts die – and weapons fall from nerveless hands, and life looks up amazed to find gentleness there still, and hope.¹¹

The Kingdom of God is like a tiny mustard seed. But have you ever seen what a single little seed, finding even the smallest hole in a whole parking lot of concrete, can do? Big tree, broken concrete! The Kingdom of God is like a small little pinch of yeast. But have you ever tasted a loaf of freshly baked bread and suddenly realized how good it is to be alive? And the Kingdom of God is like an elderly woman, bent over double, overlooked and undervalued – suddenly made to stand up straight and tall. A human being made fully alive by the grace and love of Jesus, her Savior. Whenever we see such a thing as that, we can be sure that not only is God’s Kingdom really coming, but that God’s Kingdom has already begun – in this world and in us.

¹ Darrell L. Bock, Luke: The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), p. 373

² Brittany Porch, “Let Me Introduce You to Gen Z,” Journal for Preachers, Vol. XLVI, No. 2 (Lent, 2023), pp.51-52.

³ Psalm 17:8.

⁴ Stephanie Paulsell, “Honoring the Body,” in Practicing Our Faith, Ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997), p. 19.

⁵ Galatians 5:19-21.

⁶ Galatians 5:22-23.

⁷ Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” Book IV, Chap. XX, Paragraph 7, in Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, Eds. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), p. 490.

⁸ Donald McCullough, If Grace Is So Amazing, Why Don’t We Like It? (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), pp. 105-106.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1886.

¹⁰ George A. Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), p. 21.

¹¹ Paul Scherer, “If Ye Do Well, and Suffer,” in The Place Where Thou Standest (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), p. 138.