

[LUKE 13:10-17](#)

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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 RARLY hear this text being PREACHED on, 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 this story of her HEALING is not only COMPELLING, but it's also totally UNIQUE. 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. It's a Saturday morning. We KNOW that because the people have gathered to celebrate the SABBATH. And because JESUS has come to town, they have invited HIM to be their GUEST teacher for the day. 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. MORE than that, He EMPATHIZES with her struggle. He has COMPASSION for her. And the word *compassion* LITERALLY means to *SUFFER WITH* someone. And SO, Jesus CALLS her to come forward. SLOWLY, she walks past the crowd of WOMEN who are required to sit 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 on walking, RIGHT up to the very FRONT of the synagogue, as Jesus waits. And AS she walks, MANY all of a sudden 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*. NO, Jesus says: *Woman, you are SET FREE from your ailment.* And 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. Just MAYBE He gets down on His knees, and LOOKS at this woman, EYEBALL to EYEBALL. Maybe He puts his HANDS on her HEAD, and AS He DOES, they BOTH 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 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. THAT'S empathy!

Well, on my 2 mission trips this summer (and LEARNING to EMPATHIZE is one of the reasons I GO on these mission trips, and encourage YOU to go as well), but on my 2 mission trips this summer, I kept ASKING myself the question: *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.* There's a science fiction CLASSIC by Arthur Clarke entitled, *Childhood's*

END. And IN this classic story, Arthur 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, HAVE to be ENDED. And SO, the Overlords WARN the people INVOLVED in bullfighting that they must STOP this barbaric sport. They REFUSE, however. 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. You see: the OVERLORDS have caused EVERY person in that CROWD to actually FEEL the pain EXACTLY as the BULL feels it. So of course, there is NO more BULLFIGHTING after THAT.

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 suffering and 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 IS: ALL of us KNOW the deep pain and suffering 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, to EXPERIENCE it, it can bring us such GREAT 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 & the beautiful, loving FAMILY, with whom we had 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: AFTER the scream of anguish, and AFTER the shock of recognition, then ALL the WORLD would begin to WEEP. And we would WEEP, not just for all the needless TORTURE and suffering, pain and poverty, injustice and oppression, hatred and warfare that seem to constantly PLAGUE this world, but we would ALSO weep for ALL of the MOMENTS that we have squandered, ALL of the BEAUTY that we have overlooked, ALL of the potential that we have never REALIZED, all of the WORDS that have remained unspoken, ALL of the painful confrontations that have been eternally postponed, all of the FATHERS and MOTHERS who have fallen with their SECRETS locked in their dying hearts, and for ALL of the WALLS that we have EVER failed to tear DOWN between us. 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, maybe for a YEAR. It would WEEP until the very LAST tears had SOAKED into the earth. 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 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 to tears of JOY. WHY? Well, would REALIZE that BEYOND all of 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 that day in that synagogue in Galilee, and which happens to US whenever we TRULY empathize with another human being, WHENEVER we truly EXPERIENCE the PAIN and SUFFERING 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. In fact, it's NOTHING out of the ordinary. Indeed, it's 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, but even MORE,

for sake of our bent-over WORLD. And while going off on Mission Trips HELPS us to 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, at church, at school, in our volunteer work and in our community. And that's because, EVERYWHERE, there are people who are suffering, people with whom we can EMPATHIZE. SO, MY question is: HOW and WHERE are YOU going to 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 & George Leonard's book, *Transformation*.