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## SERMON

# Spirits at Work

Luke 13:10-17

August 21, 2016

Skyline Presbyterian Church

If you've read Victor Hugo's novel the "Hunchback of Notre Dame," you know he uses an interesting literary device in the story. The reader is allowed to see the basic decency and humanity of Quasimodo, the hunchback, while the crowd sees him only as a monstrous freak. The story, in its essence, is part tragedy, and part hope.

Luke's account here in chapter thirteen is also part tragedy and part hope. He is the only Gospel-writer to records the event, but I imagine Luke, being a physician, would have been drawn to a story like this. He doesn't give us a lot of detail. In only three verses he tells us that there was a woman who was a hunchback. We don't get to know her name; we don't know her family background. We know she's had this condition for eighteen years. The implication is that she hadn't been born with it. With a modern person's perspective, we can guess at the possible causes of her suffering, but we don't know. We're simply told that a spirit has crippled her. Jesus called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." We're told that she suddenly stood erect and began praising God.

We're not quite sure what to make of this spirit, but in some way it is responsible for this woman's tragic circumstances. And as we take a closer look at this story we can see there are other spirits at work.

There is a crippling spirit at work. Because of her particular ailment she was bent over and her eyes were always facing the ground. She missed the sky, the birds, and the rainbow. But physical ailment can do far more than bend a back. It can rob us of our livelihood. It can take us away from our families. It can cause severe depression.

That is what is so disturbing about the synagogue ruler. He was so insensitive to this woman's plight. Sure, he had the truth on his side. Healing is work and it should not be done on the Sabbath. But, Jesus had a greater principle on His side—compassion. Compassion trumps rules, even the Sabbath commandment.

For this reason Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue: "You hypocrite. Do you not take care of your animals on the Sabbath? Isn't this woman, a daughter of Abraham, a daughter of the covenant, of more value than they?" What Jesus is saying is that restrictions and institutions can, if we are not careful, keep us from rising to the heights of charity to which we are called. There is no inappropriate time to express compassion. Love God, love others—then you can toss out your 635 scribal laws.

The first spirit at work has attacked a woman. She has been bent physically. The second spirit at work has attacked a man, but not physically. He has been attacked by a spirit, which has crippled his soul.

Listen to the details as Luke relates them. He tells us that this was the Sabbath. The key to understanding what really is happening here. He also tells us that this woman had her condition for eighteen years. Both these points are important. Luke is emphasizing that this was not an emergency case. It easily

could have waited until the next day. This was not an emergency room situation. If Jesus had healed a child who was burning up with fever and in imminent danger of dying, it would have made perfect sense even to the synagogue ruler. But that kind of healing would have undermined the point Jesus was making. You see this was a test. Jesus was purposely acting against scribal law to make a point: people are more important than rules. We need to be reminded of this from time to time.

The synagogue ruler did not see it that way because he had dehumanized this woman. Once we dehumanize and label someone, we can easily dismiss them. Two things happen when we have a legalistic spirit: 1. Our rules rule us and 2. Our rules supersede the wellbeing of others. When we live by these rules, people, in our eyes, become less than they were created to be.

Let me share with you a fable I once was told. There was a peasant who worked his small farm inside the walls of a great city. Although he loved the city, he also loved to walk in the forests nearby. There, he once found a stranded eagle chick, brought it home and put it among his fowls, ducks and chickens, and gave it chicken feed to eat even though it was the king of birds.

Five years later, a wise man, someone we would call a naturalist today, came to the area and was told about the peasant farmer's unusual fowl. After passing through the peasant farmer's garden, the naturalist said "That bird is an eagle, not a chicken."

"Yes, I know," said the peasant farmer, "but I have trained it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle."

"No," said the naturalist, "It is an eagle still. It has the heart of an eagle, it has the wing span of an eagle, and I will help it soar high up in to the heavens."

"No," said the peasant farmer. "It is an eagle-chicken and will never fly."

They agreed to test it. The naturalist picked up the eagle, held it up and said with great intensity. "Eagle, you are an eagle; you belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch forth your wings and fly."

The eagle turned this way and that, and then looking down, saw the chickens eating their food, and down it jumped.

The peasant farmer said, "I told you it was an eagle-chicken."

"No," said the naturalist, "It is an eagle. Give it another chance tomorrow."

So the next day he took it to the top of the house and said, "Eagle, you are an eagle; you belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch forth your wings and fly." But again the eagle, seeing the chickens feeding, jumped down and fed with them.

Then the peasant farmer said again, "I told you it was a chicken."

"No," asserted the naturalist, "It is an eagle, and it has the heart of an eagle. Only give it one more chance, and I will make it fly tomorrow."

The next morning he rose early and took the eagle outside the walls of the city and away from the

houses, to the foot of a high mountain. The sun was just rising, gilding the top to the mountain with gold, and every crag was glistening in the joy of the beautiful morning.

He picked up the eagle and said to it, "Eagle, you are an eagle; you belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch forth your wings and fly."

The eagle looked around and trembled as if new life were coming to it. But it did not fly. The naturalist then grabbed its head and made it look straight at the sun. Suddenly it stretched out its wings and, with the screech of an eagle, it flew out of his hands and mounted higher and higher and never returned. Though it had been kept and tamed as a chicken, it was an eagle.

You see, far too many people are seen as something less. But you let someone like Christ come along, straighten our backs, and point our heads toward the heavens, and then...we realize we are sons and daughters of God. We are a chosen people.

There are far too many aspects of our culture which have a way of dehumanizing us. When we allow this to happen, we fail to see our worth before God. The hunchback was, in the synagogue ruler's opinion, of little value. The narrow interpretation of the law was more important than a disfigured soul. Listen to this now: This woman's back was bent, that much is true. But, a legalistic spirit bent this man's soul all the more.

Nothing can choke the heart and soul of our walk with Christ like legalism. Does this mean that we do not have to have rules? Of course not. But it does suggest that we must be careful and not let our rules rule us. Jesus comes to us as the restorer of humanity. He sees each of us as a unique individual precious to Him.

This brings us to the third spirit at work in this story. It is the spirit of joy.

Remember the scene? We have Jesus who has been invited on the Sabbath to address the congregation. We have the synagogue ruler off to the side who has invited Him. Then you have the congregation who has heard so much about this young man from Nazareth and they are excited to have Him in their hometown synagogue. That's the scene. The stage is set. Enter, a hobbled frail woman who is known throughout the small community. They call her the cripple. Luke doesn't even name her. She is simply "The hunchback." She doesn't speak to Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that when Jesus saw her He called her forward. He takes the initiative and tells her she is set free. She is healed. Just like that. After 18 years she is freed from that which bound her. At this, I am convinced that all those present in the synagogue that morning wanted to shout with joy, but the ruling authorities shut it down and that's a shame.

Sometimes we simply have to express joy. Because of a healing or an accomplishment or a victory, we have to shout "Thank You" to God.

Never count people out. If they are sick, help heal them. If they are down on their luck, assist them. If they are not up to a task, encourage them. If they have a burden, share it. If they have failed, teach them. Jesus provided for this woman what no one else could have...a whole body. He healed her. There is no way the synagogue ruler could have healed this woman's back, but the very least he could have done was show her some respect, provided her some dignity and celebrated with her.

That I think is the lesson Jesus would have us learn. We cannot all be healers but we can treat one another like sons and daughters of God. As people who have worth in the eyes of God. My friends, this will give us a spirit of joy!

There are spirits at work in this world. Which spirit is at work within you? Is it a crippling spirit? Is it a legalistic spirit? Or, is it a spirit of joy? Whichever it is, will make all the difference in your life and in the life of others.