

Sunday, August 25, 2013: Luke 13:10-17

by [L. Roger Owens](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue

I once read an article by a medical doctor who tried to identify the condition that kept the woman in Luke 13 crippled for 18 years. I don't remember his methodology, and in retrospect it seems to me a dubious endeavor, but I was deeply interested in his conclusion: the woman suffered from an arthritic condition called spondyloarthritis. The most common version, ankylosing spondylitis, can leave the vertebrae of the spine and neck fused and bent. I remember this because I had just been diagnosed with that form of arthritis. After a year of sleepless nights and morning stiffness, after limping around campus and after visiting one specialist after another, I finally sat in front of a rheumatologist who could have been saying to me: "You are that woman."

I had never before experienced such an intimate, literal connection with a biblical story. I saw myself in this woman; I could relate to her. And that meant I could relate to Jesus. I saw in her both the possibility of future lameness and the hope of healing. It was a sorrowful and hopeful discovery.

Fifteen years later, however, I realize a contrasting truth: I have very little connection with this woman. Because of advances in medical knowledge, I can exercise and slow the progression of the disease. Anti-inflammatory drugs allow me to do all the things I want to do. Health insurance gives me access to the best doctors and diagnostic techniques. At my last visit to the rheumatologist he asked me if there was anything I wanted to do that I can't do anymore. "I don't play tennis anymore," I said, "but that has more to do with having a job and three kids than it does with arthritis." I stood six feet tall 15 years ago; I stand six feet tall today. I have very little in common with this poor woman who was bent over and unable to stand up straight.

More significantly, I have never known the social isolation and poverty that this "daughter of Abraham" probably experienced. My arthritis has never marginalized me; it hasn't prevented me from getting a college degree, keeping a job or having a family. I have no way to understand the condition of her life that Jesus calls her "bondage."

Yet he insists on emphasizing this bondage by turning our attention from the physical manifestation of the woman's disease to the broader context of her suffering. When we understand the scope of Jesus' sympathy, we can move from a biblical solipsism that inclines us to identify in a narrow way with a biblical character or story and begin to see and appreciate other dynamics that Jesus wants and needs us to see. For this reason I'm thankful that we read scripture in the context of Christian community. I'm also thankful for those who, by echoing the teachings of Jesus, draw our attention from a habit of narcissistic reading and help us see a text more widely, so that we don't miss forms of bondage with which we have been unacquainted—forms of bondage that are real and painful.

Two people have stretched my faith in this way recently. One is my bishop, Hope Morgan Ward. In early June, Bishop Ward sent a letter to the United Methodist Church that was co-written with her counterparts in other Christian denominations. She invited clergy to attend Moral Monday protests at the North Carolina capitol in Raleigh. Christians and others concerned for the welfare of those in bondage—poverty, social marginalization, poor education and inaccessibility to health care—are gathering there to protest actions of the state legislature, which has cut spending on education and on unemployment benefits for 165,000 people, is declining to offer Medicaid coverage for half a million more, and has repealed the Racial Justice Act, which allowed death row inmates to challenge racially influenced sentences. The legislature is planning to raise sales tax on food even as it cuts income tax for the wealthy.

Church leaders wrote that their concern about recent legislation "is a matter of faith with respect to our understanding of the biblical teaching and imperatives to protect the poor, respect the stranger, care for widows and children and love our neighbor." In other words, they want to be a part of Jesus' work in setting people free from bondage.

Bishop Ward said that she and her husband had been to these protests and would take part again. She encouraged the pastors under her charge to discern how the Spirit might be leading them to engage these issues, which go beyond partisan politics and affect the most vulnerable in the state.

Joining them at these protests was Reynolds Chapman, another person who has drawn me out of my own narrow readings of the Bible and helped me to see and respond to people in the kinds of bondage that I'm likely not to notice. As minister of

adult discipleship, Chapman repeatedly invited the people of his church to participate in these protests, reminding them that Jesus pays attention to marginalized people, these sons and daughters of Abraham whom he longs to see free from their bondage.

Like the leader of the synagogue who denounced Jesus, Governor Pat McCrory derided the protesters who were speaking out for the sons and daughters of Abraham, calling them “outside agitators who don’t speak for the majority of North Carolinians.” I’m thankful to have bishops, friends and colleagues who join Jesus as outside agitators who are willing to speak with those whom most people in the crowd are not likely to notice.