

August 21, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time: Luke 13:10-17

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue

Imagine the relief she must feel when, after 18 years stooped over and unable to stand tall, Jesus lifts her out of her illness. And consider how her perspective changes. For the first time in decades, she can look straight into a friend's eye or gaze toward the sky to assess the weather. Her narrowness of vision is instantly broadened. The whole world is now in her line of sight. The unnamed woman's healing in this week's Gospel reading is a story of expansion, revelation, vision widened by grace—a glorious progression toward the life God intends for all of us.

There's more to the story, however. Along with healing the woman, Jesus puts to shame those who rebuke him for healing on the sabbath. This is classic Jesus behavior: lifting up the lowly while knocking the mighty ones down from their thrones, matching a haughty rebuke with a direct and theologically grounded rebuke of his own, turning people's expectations inside out. Grace wins; hypocrisy loses. This story's reversal of fortunes is worthy of our joy, particularly because it allows the crowds in the story to experience God's grace directly through the healing work of Christ. Those who earnestly seek the furthering of God's desires for our broken world may rightly rejoice in the demotion of the haughty.

But such rejoicing can also be driven by schadenfreude, and it can harden into punitive judgment. "Yeah! You tell 'em, Jesus!" easily slips into "Yeah! Let's see 'em suffer!" People we disagree with become enemies to be vanquished. Our vindication requires the punishment of those we deem to be wrong about God, or about how we worship, or about politics. If the elevation of the losers requires the demotion of the winners, we find ourselves on a constantly shifting seesaw of glory and shame. We seek always to be on the side that is rising, with our enemies relegated to the sinking side.

This roots relationships in judgment rather than grace. Of course, there are times when judgment is the most gracious response—times when evil is so blatant that it must be suppressed immediately and at all cost. But such times are rare. Evil is usually subtler. And our desire for enemies to be shamed may be disproportional to the crime. We may not even know who the true enemy is. We may find that there's

a bit of enemy in our closest loved ones—and in ourselves. When the seesaw shifts, whoever is on top at that moment may need to be brought down—but not into shame or punishment for its own sake. Reality is more complex than that.

I imagine that when the stooped-over woman stands tall and takes in the wide world around her, she sees more than just the kind eyes of a friend or fluffy clouds in a bright sky. She also sees the breadth of suffering in her world, the expansive margins that are home to the most vulnerable, and the depth of disease and distress all around her. She sees that she has been raised up into a fallen world. Her widened perspective includes new culpability and new regrets. It requires broader empathy and engagement. Freed from her disease, she is free to serve a world in profound need. Standing tall and facing the world directly, she is now equipped to carry an even heavier cross.

The reality is that we are always being simultaneously stooped down and lifted up. That's not a bad thing. It follows the example that Jesus sets for us—his exaltation is a crucifixion, and his glory is in being weighted down with shame. As Jesus' disciples, we too bear the responsibility of letting ourselves be stooped down under the cross of Christ, even as God's grace continually lifts us up.

What does it mean for us to be both uplifted in glory and stooped down in humility? It may mean declining to wish terrible things upon the public figures who make ignorant comments about immigrants, and instead working to bring those immigrants into a more just relationship with the political and economic systems from which we profit. It may mean letting go of our deeply held convictions about the right way to worship or vote or live, instead listening for the whisperings of the Spirit—even if that whispering comes in the voice of someone we don't like. It may mean changing our perspective so that the person we regarded as an enemy now looks like a child of God.

Reading this healing story, our tendency is to side with Jesus and the woman and the crowds, and against Jesus' opponents, even to be glad about their shame. After all, they are wrong! Jesus is right: when someone is suffering, healing is more important than the letter of the law. Worship is at its best when it transforms us and lifts us into new life, not when it maintains the status quo.

But perhaps instead of rejoicing in one person's exaltation over the other, we could simply aim for kindness and healing in this complex, broken world, where everyone needs simultaneously to be exalted and humbled. Perhaps grace could replace

judgment in our assessment of those who appear to be our opponents. Rather than aiming to be lifted up while our enemies are stooped down, perhaps we could focus on seeing what God reveals to us no matter where our gaze is aimed, no matter how tall we stand. When we notice the person next to us stooped down, we might take on some of her burden without judging her worthiness. Perhaps that's where the real healing begins.