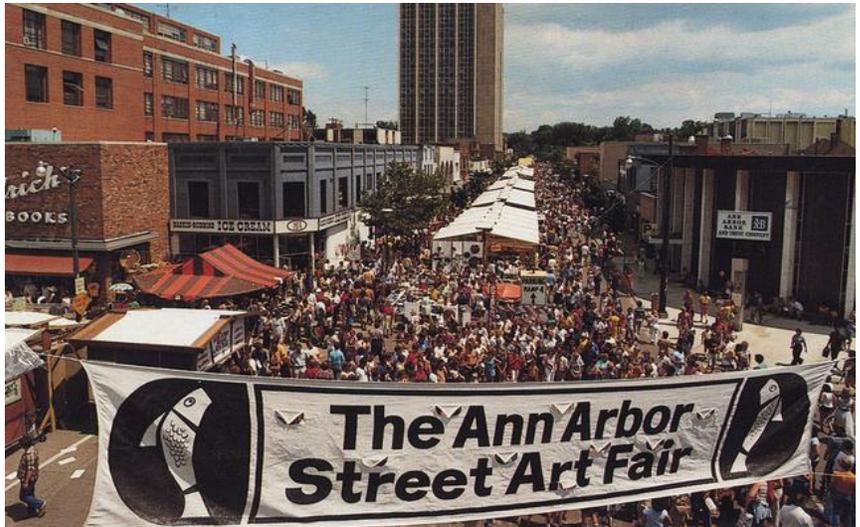


## *Our Kyphotic God*

*Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit  
that had crippled her for eighteen years.  
She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.  
(Luke 13:11)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost, July 23, 2017  
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Today, July 23<sup>rd</sup>, is the closing day of the 2017 edition of the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair, one of the largest Art Fairs in the nation attracting more than ½ million people each year, one of Michigan's finest summer traditions in this its 58<sup>th</sup> year. The Art Fair literally takes over the streets of the University of Michigan campus and downtown Ann Arbor, the city transformed into an art lover's paradise with original works of art, street performances of all types, and culinary treats of all flavors.



Oh, and if you're a people watcher, the Art Fair is a prime spot to enjoy that sport! Art Fair creates a city-wide carnival atmosphere with an odd assortment of people.

My first experience with Art Fair was in 1986, at 32 years old my first full summer in the city. At noon I ventured out of my campus office at First United Methodist Church and bravely strolled into the mixed multitude. I was headed to Burger King, as was my custom, to read the newspaper over my usual nutritious lunch: Whooper w/Cheese, onion rings, and medium Diet Pepsi. The Burger King, usually fairly quiet during the summer, was bulging at the seams. After an unusually long wait, food tray in hand, I scanned the restaurant and spotted a seat at the lone available table, one of those odd shaped corner tables seating five. Staking it out as mine, I set down my tray and opened my newspaper.

Truthfully, though, I was more nervous than relieved at having found THAT particular table. The teenagers in line behind me had not escaped my notice. I knew the likelihood they would want to share my table. I hoped not. We were different, you see, so much so that my anxieties bubbled. *"Perhaps they will get their food to go,"* I wished to myself, *"Or perhaps another table will open up to spare me the inconvenience of sharing space. Why, if they come over here, I'll look like Tony Bennett sitting midst the Grateful Dead. Me in my pressed Van Heusen slacks.*

*Black Bostonian wingtips. White Oxford dress shirt. Pierre Cardin tie. Those things, well, they were me. Juxtaposed at that corner table with me would be four bizarre weirdos in ripped and faded jeans, studded leather, pierced body parts, and tattoos.”*

As you may have guessed, my worst fears were realized. The juvenile quartet slithered my way. My first thought was politely to fold up my newspaper and leave. No way now could I enjoy my Whooper w/cheese, onion rings, and medium Diet Pepsi, not while sharing a table with these four teenage mutants. Yet, I resisted the urge to retreat. I stood my ground!

More accurately, I meekly sat, shielding myself best I could with my open newspaper. There I was, Reverend Goodpastor in a sea of punk youth at the campus Burger King, surrounded by leather, colorful tattoos, and mohawks in Dennis Rodman-type hair of every hue.

My world was only two blocks away at First United Methodist Church. In the parking lot sat my burgundy Nissan Stanza with power seats and windows, cruise control, surround sound. Barry Manilow and Kenny G awaited my command softly to serenade me on my drive home. What a contrast we were! Their transportation didn't carry them – they carried IT, both their transportation and their entertainment, sticker-decorated skateboards under their feet and a boom box in their hands. Boy, were we from different worlds!

My circuits jammed with in-flooding data about these strange characters, leaping from assumption to assumption. Would their mouths spew filthy language or perhaps even food, turning the campus Burger King into a campus Animal House, ala Belushi? Hey, I'd watched television. I knew what could happen in a situation like this.

But no, none of that. In fact, they totally ignored me. From my island of safety inside my newspaper as I bent my neck to lower my head into its shielding, I listened as they chatted. When I learned to translate their odd vocabulary and syntax, I understood they were only talking about the fun they had that morning, which booths were neat, which open-air performers were cool, and their plans for the afternoon.

At first their ignoring me was how I thought I would spell R-E-L-I-E-F. Later, though, I regretted missing an opportunity to start a conversation. How could I have been so timid? Walking back to my office, opportunity missed, I became amused at our common points. Like them, I liked burgers and fries and enjoyed getting together with friends and laughing. And, to match their Mohawks I was rapidly getting a reverse Mohawk with my receding hairline. It occurred to me that perhaps my bending to hide in my paper while playing the role of the judge of these characters actually revealed something about the character of their judge.

To be sure, we make judgments about each other all the time. It's as natural and as healthy as breathing. No one of us ever meets another without going through a process of in-gathering data. When, a few months back, I first came to Christ of the Hills to meet a group of lay servant leaders (the picture of that event in the *Village Voice* this week) no doubt minds were sharpened to form opinions. It was one of those first impression moments, a time to make a host of observations: *“How do I feel about this man? Can I picture him in our pulpit? What is his*

*position on issues facing the church today? What's his golf handicap? And perhaps most importantly after enjoying 8 years of Bubba Smith's ministry -- does he barb-que?"*

It is for this very reason – to satisfy your curiosity about your new Senior Minister -- that in these few sermons during this first summer of my ministry at COH I'm intentionally seeking to share some personal stories by way of giving you some insight into who your new pastor is. I have the advantage in this, having a pulpit and a weekly time of sharing. Perhaps I should say that YOU have the advantage in getting to know me, but how shall I come to know you? I'll have to get your stories one by one, little by little, and I look forward to hearing those stories – whether in the hallways of the church, in your homes, on the golf course, at a restaurant. Each day is an opportunity for me to be more integrated into the community and congregation through not only knowing your stories, but also by creating shared experiences as we go forward together.

You see, we form impressions by the millisecond about each other, a natural and healthy thing. This being the case we may ask what Jesus is condemning in those famous words of the Sermon on the Mount, *"Do not judge, and you will not be judged?"* He's condemning a much more pernicious side to humans judging one another, and perhaps I was getting perilously close in that campus Burger King. A primary indication of wrongful judging is the tendency to label others. Labels are little verbal prisons we build for people, using them to shield ourselves from knowing others as I used that newspaper to shield myself from those teens.

That brings me to our gospel reading from Luke which provides an example, I think, of how Jesus would have us rise above placing labels on people. Here was a woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath where Jesus was teaching who for 18 years had been *"bent over and quite unable to stand up straight."*

We never learn her name. Perhaps, when the townspeople saw this woman coming down the street, body bent, they didn't say, *"Here comes Mary,"* or *"Here comes Elizabeth."* She was known, so far as we know, by her disability. *"Here comes that bent woman."* As far as the town was concerned, that was what defined her. She was *The Kyphotic Woman*, *kyphosis* from the Greek word meaning *"lump,"* a medical term for such severe curvature of the spine that causes a bowing or rounding of the back.

There was, though, another and invisible weight this woman bore upon her shoulders that had nothing to do with Kyphosis -- the burden of being different, of not looking like others. That's why when Jesus meets her, he says something which I think is every bit as compassionate as healing her. He calls her, this bent woman, a *"daughter of Abraham."* Jesus won't join any community chorus choosing to ignore her. When he calls her a child of Abraham he renames her, invites her to imagine herself other than she might imagine herself. *"This Jesus who has created such a stir with his teachings, has looked at me, has taken note of me, has called me – ME -- a daughter of Abraham!"*

In Luke's story we observe what should happen in this sanctuary every week. People come to church weighed down in many ways and not just physically. Our lives can be Bent like a spiritual pretzel with psychological, spiritual, and moral kyphosis.

Should we not, in this place, be about giving others a new name? Should we not cast a new verdict upon their lives? Are we not to invite them to go forth from this sanctuary newly freed through Christ, having had a different word spoken over their condition? Whatever weight you may have entered this sanctuary bearing, however you might suppose others think of you, however you may think of yourself, know that in this place Jesus means to Rename you, reminding you that you are a Child of God, beloved.

Bullying is a problem that has been with the human community throughout time, but in our day of social media can have particularly devastating consequences. Cyber-bullying has become a major factor in the rise of teenage suicide, the using of social media to target and expose, harass, threaten, or simply embarrass another.

Long before Facebook I had a brush with bullying, attaching a label to another that was hurtful, joining the community chorus of children that caused distress in another. It happened in my third grade world of Forrest Park Elementary School in Pine Bluff, in 1963. The label, now sounding silly, but on that day very serious, was Cooties. Silly word, this children's term for an imaginary germ. It could have been any word, the point was that this person was set apart as different, and the sounding of the word was meant to shield us from one we wouldn't accept.

It was meant to be fun, at first, perhaps, attaching this stigma to a 5<sup>th</sup> grade girl I'll leave nameless (in the spirit of our text), though I assure you I remember her name well, and with no small measure of shame. If at first it was meant as a game, it didn't stay that way.

Funny the things we remember from childhood, the things that mark us forever. Among the multitude of things we forget, why do we remember certain moments, certain days? I was only nine, but I still recall with some vividness a traumatic day in this nameless girl's life that bent her to the ground. The day, its own way, Bent me as well.

She arrived at school and headed down the sidewalk through a playground teeming with scores of kids. The first few cries of Cooties peppered among the children and soon the hateful refrain spread through the playground. Kids abandoned the sidewalk she was on, fell to the ground, stopping whatever they were doing to join the malicious chorus, forcing her to walk from the street to the school all alone.

I didn't want to join the bullying chorus. You see, I knew her, this Bent one. She lived only a block away, I on 33<sup>rd</sup>, she on 34<sup>th</sup>. I knew, after a firm talk from my parents, how badly this game, now turned serious was hurting her. Mom and dad had asked me not to join the crowd, and I said I wouldn't . . . but I did. As my friends fell to the ground pretending to shield themselves from her, so did I. I don't recall laughing, though. I might have cried. I do recall being ashamed. I wanted to stand, to stand up straight, but couldn't find the courage, wishing just one of my friends would stand. just one brave person I could follow without risk of being alone. Not a single child stood, least of all, me.

Well, at least, that's the way I've recall it. Yes, it's funny the things we remember from childhood, the things that mark us forever. I remember this nameless one walking, tears flowing. I've often wished I had had the courage to stand that day. And I wonder if maybe there

were others who, like me, were just waiting on one leader, just one voice different from the crowd, one who would stand so that they, too, could stand. That's our real fear – isn't it? The fear of being alone. It was aloneness we were forcing this nameless girl to endure. On that day, no one had the courage to give this nameless one, this one Bent by childish cruelty, a new name.

Bottom line, there are times when we know we should act, should stand for the Bent ones. But to stand requires first bending down. How do you imagine the event Luke describes? I imagine Jesus bending down low enough to look in the eyes of this one who was so bent she couldn't even look up. If this bent woman was *The Kyphotic Woman*, she met in Jesus *The Kyphotic God*, a God bending to meet us in our need.

Yes, it's funny the things we remember from childhood. Author Mary Ann Bird tells of the power of a word of acceptance in her own childhood. Born different, in 1928 with a cleft palate, her classmates in school made it clear how ugly she looked. Misshapen lip. Crooked nose. Lopsided teeth. Garbled speech. She didn't fit in and the kids laughed. Mary Ann grew sure that no one could love her. She wrote that she would tell other children that she had fallen and cut herself on glass, because somehow it seemed more acceptable to have suffered an accident that made her like this rather than acknowledging that God made her this way, that she was born different. Mary Ann felt herself bent, misshapen.

In the second grade a teacher named Mrs. Leonard was giving a hearing test. Mary Ann wrote about that day in a memoir called, *The Whisper Test*. As the kids stood against a door and covered one ear, the teacher would whisper a sentence and ask the kids to repeat. She would whisper things like, "*The sky is blue,*" and the child would have to repeat that line. Or, "*Do you have new shoes?*" Mary Ann's turn at the door came. Mrs. Leonard looked her in the eye and whispered the seven words that put a smile on Mary Ann's face, changing her life and giving her the confidence to become the successful author she is.

What were those seven whispered words? "*I wish you were my little girl.*"

Is this not how Jesus renamed this woman, calling her a daughter of Abraham? "*You are a child of promise!*" I hope this morning you have ears to hear God saying to you, "*I wish you were my child!*" In Jesus Christ that is what we are . . . Children of the living God, heirs of God and co-heirs with Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

O God, who always sees more than we are willing to reveal, heal us of the many ways we are bent and free us from all that forces our eyes downward. May we experience the touch of your presence and be raised up, so that we may help others to experience that same touch. Teach us to see that by entering into the risks of engaging others in relationship, we find your presence in those who yearn to be made well. Make us into a community whose chorus unleashes your healing power. Amen.