

Pastor Dan Clendenin tells this following story, “Back in 2005 when I was in Ethiopia, I took a day trip to the mountains that surround the capital city of Addis Ababa. At the summit our group prayed over the city, enjoyed the panoramic views, identified buildings in the distance below, and gasped for breath after walking uphill in the alpine air. That was the fun part.

The disturbing part was our climb from the city center at 7,000 feet to the summit at 11,000 feet. As our mini-van belched clouds of light blue exhaust, the higher we went the more women and girls we passed carrying loads of firewood back down the mountain. Barefoot and bent over at the waist, these women carried seventy-five pound bundles of eucalyptus saplings, seven feet wide, down to the city center about ten miles away, all for a few pennies. The firewood carriers in Addis Ababa are a common sight, so much so that you can read about them in guidebooks like the *Lonely Planet*.

Ever since then the firewood carriers of Addis Ababa have reminded me of the crippled woman in Luke's gospel for this week. Luke is the only gospel to tell this story. It's the last time in his gospel that Jesus enters a synagogue to teach. Luke writes that the woman had been "crippled by a spirit for eighteen years" and as a consequence was "bent over and could not straighten up at all. In Addis Ababa I kept wishing that those women and girls who were "bent over and could not straighten up at all" could be freed from their bondage.” ([www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com))

Can you see yourself as the bent over woman? Can you put yourself where she is? Stooped over, looking at the ground, seeing the dirt and stones and weeds and getting dust in her face? Have you ever tried to walk while stooped over? After about two minutes your back will hurt and you'll get sick of holding your head down.

It seems that so many in our world and our community are stooped over, whether physically, spiritually, or financially. Burdens are so great that maybe the weight of their own struggles keeps them bent over. I think of Bethel Lutheran church in Viroqua who experienced a devastating fire last week that destroyed their church building. I think of the people in Haiti who are still struggling from the January earthquake and the people in Pakistan who are devastated by flooding.

This story was featured on CNN a few days ago, "Great-grandfather Busar Jatoi is surprised he is still alive. His relatives dragged his old and ailing body through rising floodwaters in Pakistan's Sindh province to save him.

"I am a 100-years-old. I reached 100!" Jatoi boomed with pride. But he also lived to see everything he has worked for in life disappear under the swirling brown water of the Indus river.

"In the water we lost all our things," Jatoi said, adding, "The government is mother and father. It should do good, but we are here with our children wracked with hunger." The Pakistani government says it is reacting responsibly and doing all it can to provide rescue and relief.

It is a Herculean task, if government figures are correct: The floods have affected 20 million people.

The Jatoi family is one of many who have slipped through what seem to be huge cracks in the aid effort. "We rescued ourselves," said Kuda Dino Jatoi said. Finding no shelter available, "we forced our way into the school," he said." "It was closed and empty."

All 25-plus members of the family have been here ever since.

It's been nearly three weeks since the flood took away their homes and livestock and covered their land. Their problems are multiplying. The heat and lack of sanitation has the place swarming with flies. The children are covered in them. The mothers in the group are beside themselves with anxiety.

"Look at her," Mussamat Islam Jatoi, said while holding her two-month-old baby girl covered with sores. "She is already dead," 20-year-old relative Arbab Jatoi chimes in matter-of-factly. No one disputes him. Little Shehnela is lethargic and she rarely opens her kohl smeared eyes. No one knows what is wrong with her.

But everyone one knows what is wrong with Hurmat Jatoi, another of the group's mothers. She is pale and moves ever so carefully. "I am sick because I am always thinking about my little girl."

Her sickness is grief. Her two-year-old daughter was the only family member who did not survive the raging floodwaters. "I have no more children. She was the only one," she said.

The depth of suffering in this one Pakistani family cannot be adequately described in words. But one look at their faces and you can almost feel it. "Surviving is very hard," Hurmat Jatoi said before shuffling back to her cot to continue mourning."

Sometimes it literally hurts to know how much people are bent over from grief or worry or fear. I encourage you to give a special offering to Lutheran World Relief today. We have special marked envelopes. Your offering will go to places like Haiti and Pakistan and no matter the amount, will help to heal what is already so broken and bent over.

And what about you? Are you standing up straight or are you bent over? What are you holding on your back? What shame or guilt or fear or hurt or grief is stooping you over?

One thing our family was very worried about was the possibility that Matt's job at Sparta High school was going to be cut to part time. This was certain for a few months and so as a family we were preparing the budget to be very tight and we were wondering how we'd manage. Luckily, a full time job opened at a charter school and so Matt will be employed full time, but for a long time we were stooped over with anxiety and uncertainty about the future. So what has you stooped over?

Whatever you're carrying on your back, hear this: When you're stooped over, you're closest to the foot of the cross. That's not to say you're meant to stay there. But when you're at the foot of the cross, Jesus is holding tightly to you and Jesus meets you in your suffering.

But then Jesus does more. Jesus sets you free. Jesus sees you and places his hands on you and tells you to stand up. Whether you've been stooped over for 18 years or 10 minutes. You are not meant to remain bent over with burdens.

Let's go back to our Gospel reading: "there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight."<sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."<sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God."

Put yourself in that story: "there appeared Jean with a spirit that had crippled her for many years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw Jean, he called her over and said, "Jean, you are set free from your ailment. When he laid his hands on her, immediately Jean stood up straight and began praising God."

"There appeared Matt or Chris or Amy or John or Logan or Lynn with a spirit that had crippled him or her for many years. They were bent over and quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw them, he called them over and said, YOU are set free from your ailment. When he laid his hands on them, immediately YOU stood up straight and began praising God.”

In a bit you will get to write what's been stooping you over on a piece of paper. And then you will be asked to stand up...Jesus is calling you to stand up straight, and come over here to the fire pit, and to lay those burdens down into the fire.

And then we also get to welcome Julian into God's family today through baptism. We get to watch as he gets laid down into the water of God's mercy and watch as he then gets lifted up as a new child of God. Let Julian's baptism be a remembrance of your baptism as well. As a way to lay your burdens down and to be able to stand up straight as you leave worship this morning, being able to praise God as the one who makes us whole again. Amen.