

We all know what it means. To be *"bent out of shape."* Aggravated at something, sometimes a small inconvenience at other times a big headache. It may be a first-world problem, like the socks don't match and where is my cell phone anyhow? Or it may be that the medical procedure or surgery that we want desperately to make happen gets delayed. And then delayed again.

Maybe we're annoyed, too. Even angry. It happens.

The woman in today's story was literally *"bent out of shape."* For 18 years. Couldn't stand up straight. A few years ago my lower back went into spasm so badly that I couldn't sleep. The only way I could get some relief was hot showers in the middle of the night until the muscle relaxers kicked in. It took weeks to get over it. I can't begin to imagine 18 years of that.

But there she was, showing up in church of all places, with her infirmity there for everyone to see, all bent out of shape. Maybe that's why she was there. In the synagogue, interrupting the teaching of Jesus. Maybe she was bent out of shape from being bent out of shape. The text doesn't tell us.

What is does tell us is that Jesus noticed. He saw her. He called her over. He laid hands on her. It might be fair to wonder the last time she was truly seen....recognized....touched. *"Woman"*, he said. In our time our men better run for cover as to address a woman that way. *"Ma'am,"* as I was taught growing up; Miss or Ms. in more recent times.

But in Jesus' time to say *"Woman"* conveyed respect, honor. *"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."* And she was. And she began praising God. Right there. In the synagogue. On the Sabbath.

Oops! Didn't Jesus know better? The Sabbath day and all? The Fourth Commandment and all? *"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. you shall not do any work....."*

The leader of the synagogue reminded Jesus of this, since it seemed Jesus hadn't absorbed the Sunday School lesson. The synagogue leader was bent out of shape at this violation of one of the Big Ten rules, right there in God's house.

Policies – rules by any other name – have their place. *"Religion"* comes from a Latin word meaning *"rules."* We live in a nation governed by laws. It's

within my lifetime, and some of yours, that Blue Laws existed in the United States, closing stores on Sundays and limiting other commercial activity. Those of us who remember that time remember that it allowed for families to be together more, without the distraction and temptation to do those things that could be done the other six days. To the day my father died, he would never mow grass on a Sunday. The purpose was to give honor to God. It's easy to get bent out of shape about the erosion of the culture we knew and be self-righteous about folks who we perceive as irreligious.

Like Jesus. In this story, Jesus was irreligious, violating the letter of the law of this Commandment while getting to the heart of God: showing compassion to a person, "*a daughter of Abraham*" as he said, and overcoming the power of Satan to bind her.

The issue for us is not "*Will we get bent out of shape?*" We will. The question is "*About what will we get bent out of shape?*"

Years ago the Christian speaker Tony Campolo shook up an audience by telling them that 30,000 kids had died while they were sleeping. Then, using a profanity, he said the audience didn't give a hoot. Then he challenged them by suggesting that some of them would be more bent out of shape over his profanity than over the deaths of 30,000 children.

Am I advocating the use of profanity? No. But let's be clear about the things that truly tear God's heart. The times in which we live seem increasingly inclined to disregard the men and women who, like the woman in this story, are on the margins. At least one public official has mocked someone with a disability.

We at WUMC are taking a different path. This fall we will have a reprise of last spring's Art4All event where developmentally challenged young people will display their art in our church. And a speaker is scheduled the evening of October 19 by our Affirmation and Inclusion team to address advocacy for persons with handicapping conditions. These steps are hardly radical, yet "*When cruelty becomes normal, compassion seems radical.*"

So if you're bent out of shape, let it be for the same things that annoyed and angered our Lord and Savior Christ: hypocrisy, self-centeredness, cruelty and loveless religiosity that placed policies above people. Because they, too, are sons and daughters of God and siblings Christ came to save. Amen.