In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon for this morning is about the poor, bent-over woman. The opening verses of the story go this way:

Now he [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 And there was a woman who had had a spirit of infirmity for eighteen years; she was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. (Luke 13:10-11, RSV)

There is a woman like this in our neighborhood. Perhaps you know the woman I mean. She is often on the sidewalks and she asks for money. Whenever I hear this story of our Lord healing the woman bent over for eighteen years, I think of this lady in our neighborhood. She is a little person, bent over and leaning to the side. She is always sweet to me wherever I see her. She smiles and says, “How are you doing, Father?” I give her money sometimes, including money from the jar at the Pastor’s Booth, and she gives me things too sometimes—perhaps a pastry or some clothing for our Christmas bazaar or for the Sisters of Fraternité Notre Dame. She does not have much money, clearly, and at times it seems that she struggles with alcohol or drugs. But she is always a sweet person to me. I have given up long ago trying to figure out some sure principle about giving money to poor people on the sidewalk. Sometimes I do, sometimes I do not. It never seems to matter to this woman one way or the other. She always says, “Have a good day, Father.” She and I are growing old together.

It makes my heart ache to see this bent-over woman in our neighborhood. She has to struggle to lift her head enough to look at you in the face. In our city there are many tall buildings to hinder our vision, but still many of us like to look up at the sky, to see the clouds there, or a rainbow, or perhaps to see the gathering colors of the evening dusk. But this woman in our neighborhood... I doubt that she can straighten herself enough even to look up at the sky.

And so it was for the woman in this morning’s Gospel story. She was bent over for eighteen years. The Bible says that she could not straighten herself.

But on this good day of our Gospel story, she meets Someone who can straighten her. She meets Jesus. She does not request or plead to be healed. Jesus just does it. He commands sin, death, and the devil to let her go! Let her
go! He lays his hands upon her and immediately she is made straight. Now she can look up at the sky. Now she can look up at the moon and the stars in the night time. Now she can look people square in the face, no longer disabled, no longer distinguished from them.

The next thing the Bible says about this woman is that she “praised God.” Amen! She praised God!

13And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. (Luke 13:13, RSV)

That is the great idea I want to explore in this sermon: Jesus heals the woman and she praises God. For us, there shall be no thinking of God that does not involve thinking of Jesus of Nazareth—this good Man who healed the woman bent over for eighteen years. For us there shall be no thinking of God that does not include this great Man of compassion.

As I get older I enjoy the story of the Transfiguration of our Lord even more. Picture the situation of the ruler of the synagogue in this morning’s Gospel story. He imagines himself to be standing before a man like other men. He stands before Jesus and scolds him for healing the bent-over woman on the Sabbath day. Oh! I wish he could suddenly see Jesus as our Lord appeared on the Mount of Transfiguration. That would be great fun! Picture the ruler of the synagogue lecturing away at Jesus and the woman who is now free and straight, and suddenly this Jesus appears before him in his glory. The face of Jesus is more radiant than the sun in the sky. His garments are whiter than any worker on earth could make them. At his side stand Moses and Elijah themselves. And the voice of our heavenly Father commands the ruler of the synagogue to listen to Jesus. Listen to the Man he dares to scold.

Because that is the truth of things! The ruler does not know it but in his supposed defense of the Third Commandment about the Sabbath, he is in fact lecturing away to the very Author of the Ten Commandments. I mean this quite literally. Look at our rear altarpiece here at Immanuel Lutheran Church. You see Moses there on the left, holding the tablet of stone on which the Ten Commandments are engraved. And you see St. John the Evangelist to the right—a great preacher of the Gospel. But there in the middle we have Jesus. St. John’s Gospel is above all about Jesus. And the Ten Commandments held by Moses were given to him by Jesus. Well, somebody handed those commandments to Moses. Somebody engraved them on the stone tablet. Somebody spoke with Moses up there on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights. The Bible says that the LORD did this. Well, if the LORD did this, then the Second Person of the Holy Trinity was involved. The Second Person of the Holy Trinity is the Word of God. He is the revelation of God. In the fullness of time, he is born at Christmastime, as Jesus of Nazareth. But his character does not change. What he was on top of Mount Sinai teaching Moses the Ten
Commandments so he is in today’s Gospel story, straightening the bent-over woman and listening to the complaints of the ruler of the synagogue.

What all this means is that the ruler of the synagogue is in over his head when he lectures Jesus. And the people know it! They know that Jesus has spoken with the kind of authority about the Sabbath commandment that the ruler of the synagogue cannot match. He cannot match it at all—not one little bit! If anyone knows what the Sabbath commandment means, it is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—the very Author of the commandment.

Perhaps we can catch the logic of what Jesus is saying about the Sabbath commandment if we make a distinction between the words of the commandment versus the intention of the commandment. The issue here is not whether to obey the commandment. Rather the issue is how to obey the commandment.¹ Jesus knows and authoritatively teaches that the purpose of the Third Commandment is that there shall be rest and freedom to praise God. On at least one day out of seven, we should have freedom to listen to God, to commune with him, and to praise him. That is exactly what this woman does. On this Sabbath day she praises God. But to get to that point she need to be set free, and so Jesus does this. Jesus explains himself to the ruler of the synagogue, saying:

¹And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?"

If an ox or a donkey can be led from its stable to water so that it can get a drink, so can this woman be set free from her infirmity so that she can praise God. That is what the Sabbath commandment is about—that we should be able to praise God.

So two things are going on in this morning’s Gospel story: Jesus is giving authoritative teaching about the Sabbath day, and he is practicing compassion on a woman in need. Let us focus on this compassionate character of Jesus as we move on toward the end of this sermon.

The amount of suffering in our world is immense. There is an ocean of misery around us. The occasions for mercy and compassion are endless. This woman in our Gospel story... She walks bent over for eighteen years. She is a symbol of our poor human race, bent over and burdened with sorrows and setbacks. We live in a “fallen world.” So the theologians say... a “fallen world.” Our backs curve with the weight they carry, our hearts often sink, sometimes we can barely lift our faces to look at the sun. Instead we walk along with our

heads hanging and with our hearts sad. Gravity pulls us down and bends our spines. Guilt and regrets leave our hearts heavy. Downward, downward we are inclined to go, both physically and emotionally sometimes. We face obstacles. We live with limitations. The years pass and we have not accomplished as much as we had hoped. And so we hang our heads from time to time. This bent-over woman in today’s Gospel story is a great and moving symbol of our weary and heavy burdened humanity.

I visited one of the elderly members of our congregation yesterday, and she mentioned that when she was young, you couldn't keep her off the dance floor! But now her knees hurt and her back, and she does not dance as she did when she was young. I was very happy to tell her that Jesus is going to fix that. He is able to strengthen the bad knees and to permit us to run and leap and dance and everything!

So, Jesus comes along and heals this poor bent-over woman in our Gospel story. It is a help to her and an image for us of that great day when Jesus will heal us all and lift the burdens from a suffering humanity. You can picture the plight of suffering people around the world. Let your pity for others give you some measure of the compassion of Jesus for everyone. If you have sympathy for a suffering world, Jesus has even more. And he has not only sympathy but also the capacity and the determination to make things better for us. There is afoot in our world Someone who can straighten the curved back, strengthen the weary hands, and give us eternal life in his kingdom. That is our Gospel message for this morning. Jesus lifted up the bent-over woman and he means to lift us up too. To him be the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.