

**Luke 13**  
**2/28/2016**  
**Cross of Comfort**

Once there was a Boy who went into a pet shop, looking for a puppy. The store owner showed him a litter in a box. The boy looked at the puppies. He picked each one up, examined it, and put it back into the box.

After several minutes, he walked back to the owner and said, “I picked one out. How much will it cost?”

The man gave him the price, and the boy promised to be back in a few days with the money. “Don’t take too long” the owner cautioned. “Puppies like these sell quickly.”

The boy turned and smiled knowingly, “I’m not worried, mine will still be here.”

The boy went to work – weeding, washing windows, cleaning yards. He worked hard and saved his money. When he had enough for the puppy, he returned to the store.

He walked up to the counter and laid down a pocketful of wadded bills. The store owner sorted and counted the cash. After verifying the amount, he smiled at the boy and said, “All right son, you can go get your puppy.”

The boy reached into the back of the box and pulled out a skinny dog with a limp leg, and started to leave.

The owner stopped him.

“Don’t take that puppy,” he objected. “He’s crippled. He can’t play. He’ll never run with you. He can’t fetch. Get one of the healthy pups.”

“No thank you sir” the boy objected. “This is exactly the kind of dog I’ve been looking for.”

As the boy turned to leave, the store owner started to speak but remained silent. Suddenly he understood. For extending from the bottom of the boy's trousers was a brace – a brace for his crippled leg.

The owner understood that the boy wanted that dog because he knew how it felt. And he knew it was special.

Today we continue our look at the cross. This central symbol of our faith that takes on many meanings from grace to hope to forgiveness. It is ironic and surprising that a tool of torture and humiliation used by the Roman Empire to execute, in their minds, a common criminal – could be transformed into a symbol of faith – of love – of hope. But that is the power of the Spirit and the power of what happened on that rugged cross long ago, and continues to this day. For nothing about the cross was comfortable – was easy – was without pain. But on that cross we see Jesus laid bare – fully open – one with us – one for us. On that cross Jesus knows how we feel, Jesus knows our pains, knows our hurts, and just like that little boy in the pet shop knows we are special – knows how we feel. For that is why Jesus is there in the first place – for you – for me. Taking our pain – our burdens – our hurts that we might know – fully know peace – hope – relief. This is the gift – for which we have no words – this is the gift of the cross.

It is the cross that brings comfort to broken hearts, healing to broken spirits, forgiveness to broken relationships. I have in my ministry walked with people in tremendous grief – in tremendous pain who have found in the cross what we heard this morning as Christ calls to us to come and take his yoke, come to the cross and find rest, find peace, and find comfort as our burdens are eased and lifted. This is the essence of Good News that we live out. That through

the cross by the power of Christ we are touched and transformed – we are comforted and our burdens lifted.

For this is what we saw in our Gospel lesson. Imagine with me a moment a woman so bent over that her entire world is seen from the waist down. Can you imagine what life was like for her? She recognized people by their feet, the style of their sandals. She knew houses by their doorsteps. She recognized streets by the ditches alongside them. And in her time, there was no medical treatments like we have today. No true understanding of her condition. She was a woman with no legal rights. Further, in Jewish society, those who were crippled were unclean and to be avoided. So, this woman must have lived a very lonely life, having people leave rooms when she entered, look away as she hobbled down the street. People saw her, but only to look through her.

So, on one particular day, one like no other, she travels to the synagogue. Except on this day there was someone who was truly going to see her, understand her, and reach out to her as no one had before.

In the middle of his sermon, Jesus notices this woman, stops his message, and calls out to her. She must have been surprised and even thought about walking away. After all, who would call out to her? For that matter why would this man talk to her since Jewish men did not talk with women they didn't know.

She didn't realize that Jesus knew all about her, knew her loneliness, and her pain and on that day he had chosen her.

So, probably feeling unworthy, nervous, and a little bit curious she goes over to Jesus, who loudly proclaims, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And then he laid his hands

on her, something men did not do either, but immediately for the first time in her life she stood up straight and could not help but begin to praise God.

I believe that's the way Jesus works best. One on one; face to face; soul to soul. I believe that's the way Jesus knows he has our full attention. He calls us out from the group and deals with only us; one at a time. He calls us by name to offer us comfort and healing.

In fact, he knows us so well, that he is able to look at us and see just what we need, where we need straightening, so to speak. Perhaps physically straightened, as the woman in the story. Perhaps spiritually straightened, if we are heading astray. Perhaps emotionally, or psychologically straightened. Jesus wants us to be whole. Jesus wants us to know him, one on one – as he knows us.

The power of the cross of comfort is that as much as Jesus did die for us as a group, he also died for us as individuals. For you, for me. For each one of us. He cares that much for each of us. It is also, therefore, as individuals that we need to respond to Jesus. Jesus calls us by name. Jesus calls us to heal us. To lift our burdens – forgive our sins - offer us an abundant life. But we must respond to that call for a relationship to exist.

If we are honest we will admit that life sometimes has a way of beating us down, zapping our enthusiasm, crushing our plans. Little by little we can find ourselves bent over from failures, disappointments, and guilt. We end up like the bent over woman - lurking at the edges of life, wondering where we can go.

So often in life we look for healing, and wholeness, and fulfillment in all the places of this world. In all the distractions of this world. In all the ways that leave feeling emptier and emptier. We think that the next relationship will satisfy us, or the next drink, or the next TV

show, or the next meal, or the next high price purchase we make. And just like that crippled woman found out in the temple, we never realize that source of healing, the source of abundant life, that Jesus Christ is right beside us calling out our name.

So let me tell you about one person touched by the power of the cross of comfort – Someone who was broken and lost - Ann and her husband were a typical married, young couple in their mid-30's. Very busy in their respective lives. Their romance faded early, but neither wanted to give up their life-style. Besides, both adored their children, and their youngest son, T. J.

Even though the children were never sent to Sunday school and God was never mentioned in their home, one day T. J., out of the blue, said, "Mama, I love you more than anything in the world, except God. And I love him a little bit more!"

Ann was surprised but told him it was okay. But why would he speak of God? She wondered.

Two days later, on a bitterly cold day, while his sister was horseback riding, T. J. crossed a snow-covered creek, fell through the ice and died. Ann remembers saying, "I hate you God!"

Her world shattered. She remembered the Christmas gift T. J. had bought her that week. He had kept trying to give it to her before Christmas. Each time she had laughed and told him to put it away until Christmas Day. When she got home from the stables where he had died, she hurried upstairs to open it. Inside was a beautiful necklace with a cross.

Holding the cross in her hands, Ann felt a peace she had never felt before. And she began a journey of healing that day walking with the one who offers his hand and heart in compassion – one who also knew suffering and who died to redeem us and who says – “follow me and I will

give a peace that passes all understanding” Ann says that through her relationship with Jesus she has been able to reach out to others rather than become lost in herself. "Helping others helped me." Ann's husband also changed, and together they became new creatures in Christ. Through her ordeal, Ann discovered a gift for spiritual hospitality, bringing healing to other parents.

By now, this young mother has reached out to help hundreds of families who have lost children in accidents. She calls her efforts T.J. Ministries, not only after her T.J., but to emphasize how she's made it since then: Through Jesus.

What I hope we hear this day is that we find comfort at the cross, our burdens are relieved, our sins forgiven so that we may be strengthened to share this good news and be this good news for our world – God may accept us where we are but never wants to leave us there – We are called to be sent – accepted to be strengthened – freed so we can serve - just like Ann did through her ministry and we can in our ministry as we make God’s love real.

So, no matter what we are going through - God wants us all to stand up straight! Jesus Christ came into this world so that we might have life and have it more abundantly. For the saving healing power of Christ in our lives doesn't mean we will not suffer or continue to hurt. What it means is that we will have a strength and a power outside of ourselves to give us resolve, to give us courage, to bolster our faith that no matter what we face we don't have to fear or panic or give up on life. As we come the cross - Jesus knows us, with all our faults, failures, sins, and crippling pains, and he loves us. It is this abiding presence of Christ that heals our spirits and gives us new life.

Sometimes this new life comes about not through a physical healing but a healing of our hearts, our souls and our minds. It is often a healed soul that allows us to have a healthy attitude, mindset, and perspective on life. Listen to a modern woman who has been healed by Jesus, though she still walks with the aid of crutches. One day at the grocery store she had an encounter with a little girl. It went like this:

"A little girl looked at me with bright blue eyes. And she asked in childish innocence, 'Are you crippled?' I replied, 'No dear, I only need crutches to help me walk.' For to me, being crippled is a state of mind, not a state of health. You are crippled if you have lost your enthusiasm for tomorrow and live only in yesterdays; if self-pity becomes a way of life instead of counting blessings; if adversity makes you want to give up instead of bravely persevering. You are crippled if your own preoccupation with self blinds you to your brother's burden. You are crippled if cynicism causes your faith to waver instead of remembering that his eye is on the sparrow.

"'Are you crippled'? the little girl asked. 'No dear, I only need crutches to help me walk.'" Hear the call of Christ, respond to your name. Let us come to the cross to find comfort, healing, forgiveness – let us come bringing all our crippling conditions and your bad backs – all our burdens and stresses. For there is a balm in Gilead and through the cross there is relief for our souls and spirits. Jesus wants to liberate us, to touch us, and to send us forth from this place with joy in our hearts. God wants us all to come and stand up straight in faith – in hope – in peace! Amen.