

Isaiah 58:1-12

Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet! Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins. ²Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God. ³“Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?” Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. ⁴Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist. Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high. ⁵Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? ⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? ⁸Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. ⁹Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, ¹⁰if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. ¹¹The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. ¹²Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then 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. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Isaiah 58:1-12; Luke 13:10-17

In this gospel reading for today, we hear a healing story: a story in which Jesus encounters someone who is burdened with some ailment or affliction and is moved to relieve that person's suffering. In this case, the person is a woman: a bent over woman to be more exact. As the story goes, she has been bent over for 18 long years. Jesus sees her, calls to her, touches her, and she is able to stand up straight.

But who is this woman? What is her name? What is her story?

The scripture doesn't really say much about her. It tells us she had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. Some people and even some translations of the Bible call this an evil spirit, some supernatural element that is acting upon her, perhaps even punishing her. But this so-called spirit can also be understood as one of the many emotional or mental stresses that people live with:

- Maybe she had lost a child those eighteen years ago, or some other tragedy had struck her and she was bent over with sadness, her grief having long since turned into a depressive hopelessness.
- Maybe she had lost her husband and her means of support and had worried for eighteen long years about how she would provide for her family.
- Maybe she was the victim of violence and her fear and shame kept her hunched over, waiting for the next blow.
- Maybe she was simply exhausted from her endless work in the kitchen and in the home, slaving over the hot oven and the endless sweeping and scrubbing to keep things tidy.

Jesus tells her she is set free from her ailment. Maybe she had a physical disease that had left her disfigured. Perhaps she had something like polio or osteoporosis which had weakened her bones and curved her spine.

We simply don't know anything about her except what might be seen on the surface of her and what we might assume about her. And that makes me think about how we see each other. Or, rather, it makes me wonder whether we ever really see each other. How often do we get past the surface of people? Do we take the time to hear people's stories? Or are we content with just piecing together our own version of who we think they are or who we need them to be to fit our ideas or stereotypes or objectives?

Take ECH and the people we serve, for instance. Many of you remember us best as Evangelical Children's Home, our name dating back to the 1940's when we still operated primarily as an orphanage for mostly younger children. Perhaps you will even remember our original heritage as the German Protestant Orphans Home, which opened its doors to children who lost their parents during the cholera epidemic in 1858.

We have grown and changed a lot in the last 150 plus years, expanding our programs and services to meet the ever changing needs of children and families.

We now serve older youth who are aging out of the foster system through transitional and independent living programs in St. Louis and Kansas City.

We work with hundreds of children and families in the community. Through our Family Solutions for Kids program, we help families learn better skills for living together and navigating life's challenges together. We offer foster case management services to help find safe homes for children. We care for the very young children from the community, ages 2-6, in our Head Start Early Education Center on the St. Louis Campus. And we offer a safe and highly structured alternative school for grades 2-12.

But, what many people think of when they remember Every Child's Hope, are the children who live with us in the residential treatment program. I want to tell you about a few of those children today. I want you to hear their stories.

Take Greg for instance, who was abducted by his drug-addicted mother in his infancy and lived on the run with her in unsafe environments for almost eight years. His perspective was so shaped by this experience that when he was reunited with his father, he thought his father had kidnapped him. He began modeling the behaviors he had witnessed in his mother and the acquaintances she made.

Or consider Lexi, a girl who came to us when she was 15, from an unstable family environment. She was growing up in a strict household dominated by the boyfriend of Lexi's mother. When they were not being forced to complete excessive household chores, Lexi and her siblings were often locked in their rooms or otherwise not allowed to leave the house. There was no room for error in behavior or attitude. Infractions were met with harsh words or physical pain induced by a variety of means. In order to establish some sense of control in her own life, and to find a point of release for some of her pain, Lexi turned to self-harm and eventually became suicidal.

David was just a toddler when he was first molested by his mother. This sexual abuse continued for years until his mother was incarcerated on other charges. David's father was in the picture but only in irresponsible and unpredictable ways. So, David was placed in the care of an aunt, who never had anything good to say about David and kept telling him he was going to end up just like his mother. .

These are just three stories of children who come to us in need of being seen and heard, and in need of safety, hope and healing.

And we try and meet these needs:

- By providing individual and group therapy where they can talk about their experiences
- By teaching them new coping skills for managing their pain and anger
- By learning who they are and not leaving them

We try and offer them safety:

- By giving them a structured and predictable home to live in
- By staffing the homes with adults who model patient firmness
- By teaching them basic life skills in these homes, like personal grooming and hygiene, laundry and cleaning

We try and offer them safety and healing:

- By providing opportunities to interact in healthy ways with peers and adults
- By introducing them to new activities and recreational opportunities
- By establishing a safe school in which they can learn basic skills and further their education

We try and offer them safety and healing and hope:

- By offering spiritual support and opportunities to deepen their faith or simply connect their faith to their experiences
- By helping them become accountable to something bigger than themselves
- By challenging their assumptions and broadening their perspectives

These are the things we do at ECH when we receive children into our care, look beyond the paperwork and our own assumptions, listen to their stories, and work to help free them from what hurts them and keeps them bound to the way things have always been. And as we walk with them through their daily routines, through their pain and anguish, and through their outbursts, tantrums and other destructive methods of coping, occasionally we see the light breaking within them and upon them. Sometimes we see foundations being laid for better decisions and more successful lives.

Remember the children I told you about earlier?

Greg continues to live at ECH and work to untangle his memories and perspectives and learn how to cope with what life has brought him so far. There are still some bad days. But there are good days too.

Lexi has moved off campus to one of our group homes and is well on her way to living independently and pursuing the life that is before her.

David is living with his grandfather and recently stopped by ECH to make a donation to the agency.

When I have the opportunity to speak with Lexi and David now, and with others who have successfully moved on from Every Child's Hope, they share a perspective of being gifted by the many people who cared for them while they were residents at ECH. They also acknowledge how they struggled and resisted and couldn't see the benefits coming to them through their hard work, the caring of others, and quite often, the work and presence of God in their lives.

This perspective is not always shared by the kids who are still in treatment. More often, they share a sense of being alone, up against all the forces of the world, and abandoned by God. They cannot see the ways God is showing up for them every day. They cannot see the bread that is being offered, or the house that is being opened, or the clothing and comforters given to them to cover them and keep them warm.

Regardless of the receptiveness of others, the story of the bent over woman and the challenge from God in the Isaiah reading give us a mandate. This is certainly true for ECH, but it is also true for each of us. We are called to look at one another and care: to care enough to see beyond our own interest and objectives; to stay long enough to get to know what is really going on in other people's lives; to identify the hardships and burdens that are all around us; and to find ways to relieve the suffering in the world, not create more of it.

You are a congregation familiar with this. Your generosity and support of Every Child's Hope has been faithful and meaningful for years. We are truly grateful for your partnership in the work and ministry of acceptance, safety, hope and healing, which we seek to provide.

It often takes a lot of caring and a lot of time for a little bit of healing. Whether we are offering the care, enduring the time, or looking for a way out of our own suffering, we can trust that we are not alone. God is always in our midst, present to our suffering, and helping us find our path to hope and healing.

Thanks be to God. Amen.