

“In Search of a Straw”

Luke 13:10-17

(Jesus healed the “bent-over” woman.)

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Super Bowl puts me in the mind of a story to tell you about a man whose lucky number was five. He was born on May 5, 1955...One day he noticed in the newspaper that there was going to be a race in which a horse named Lucky Five was to compete in the fifth race with odds of five to one. Ecstatic from this sign from the Universe, he drove to the race track where he put \$5,000 on Lucky Five to win. The horse came in fifth.

I may have led some *astray about a straw*. Because this is Super Bowl Sunday, some people may have assumed that the straw, which we are in search of, would be a straw that we'd put into our Coke while munching on Doritos this afternoon.

I had a different straw in mind.<sup>1</sup>

The straw we are focusing upon this morning is the “last straw.” Perhaps it is your last straw, perhaps it is the last straw of others whom you know—or can imagine. “The straw that broke the camel’s back.” The camel can carry a huge load, but at some point, one more addition to that load, however light, is just too much.

The woman whom we heard about in our Scripture reading seemed to have had many straws upon her back. She is called “bent-over,” “stooped,” or “crippled.” Notice that she and Jesus were at the synagogue on the Sabbath. *She* did not go up to Jesus, reach for his robe, or call out to him--as others in the Bible are said to have done. JESUS SAW HER and called over to her, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then, when he laid hands upon her, she stood up straight and began praising God.

I’m not going to discuss the reaction of the religious leaders, as they criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. I want to focus on Jesus and the woman.

First, notice that Jesus did **not** say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or anything like that. He said, “Woman, you are set free.”

Jesus did **not** even mention “sin.” However, I want to mention it. First, I need to take a diversion which truly is a profound theological insight. I want to talk about “han.” That’s spelled “H A N.”

I first heard the word “han” when a wonderful Korean-American theologian who is also a United Methodist minister, Andrew Sung Park, wrote the book: *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*.

I’m going to give a very simple example: Let’s say that when I introduce someone, I lose focus and say the wrong name. Instead of introducing Zach Jones correctly, I call him Archie Smith. Zach is somewhat befuddled and corrects me, “I’m Zach Jones.” “Oh, I’m so sorry” would be my reaction. And, I would mean it. I wanted to introduce Zach correctly, and I don’t know why I goofed up. I am embarrassed both for him and for myself. And, I wish he did not suffer the consequences of my bad behavior.

Zach would probably say, “Oh, that’s okay.” He might add, “We all do that sometime,” or some other reassuring phrase.

I could proceed throughout the day and only seldom--or never again--think of Zach suffering from my error. After all, I did not mean to do harm, and I apologized for the harm I caused.

However, Zach may be hurt. Perhaps others have consistently called him by the wrong name his entire life. He wonders why people can't see him and name him clearly. He might be discouraged, even as he doesn't actually hold much against me.

In this minor matter, you could say that I "sinned." I did something I should not have done. I lost focus and hurt someone--didn't appreciate him as he really is. You could argue that since it was completely an accident, I shouldn't be too hard on myself, but you would agree, I made a mistake.

In this scenario I, the miss-namer, have *some* pain. My pain could be called the pain of sin--something I did that I should not have done.

Zach suffers too. Is his pain the same as mine? Would we say that the pain of the one who was miss-named is the same as the one who did the miss-naming? Probably not.

**The pain of the one who *suffers* from the consequence of someone else's sin can be called "han."**

*Han is the under-side of sin.* It's what one experiences when one has been sinned-against. My example was about as simple as can be. Most of the time when there is any kind of pain, there is no one sinner-person and one wounded-person with han. Mistakes and intentional bad behavior are so mixed up that often it is not so clear who sinned and who is sinned against.

The noteworthy thing about han is that for 2000 years of Christian theology, it was not named!

Jesus didn't make as big a deal about sin as some Christian theologians did centuries later. And, today we don't talk about sin as much as people did in church a few decades ago. Yet, no one had talked about **han** as the "under side of sin" until Andrew Sung Park. Now, "han" is such an important idea in theology that conferences are held to deal with the topic... just a few years ago there was such a conference in Claremont that drew 50 theologians from around the world!<sup>2</sup>

Think about attending church and arriving at the point in the worship when we confess our "sins." Often that has been worded something like this: "Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you . . . by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent." I've quoted that from the *United Methodist Book of Worship*.

What happens when Zach Jones prays that confession? He may have made other mistakes, but in regard to my miss-naming him, he did not sin. I did. This actual prayer of confession does the very same thing I did--it miss-represents him as one who has done wrong, when indeed wrong was done to him.

The sin that truly dominated much of the leadership of Christianity for centuries has been the sin of "pride." Many prayers written by leaders include confessions that ask forgiveness for being overly prideful. (European Theologians) Think of a person who does **not** feel good about themselves coming to worship and confessing that they feel *too* good about themselves. That's what Christian worship has asked people to do for centuries. If I feel worthless, like a nobody, and I go to church and confess that I think

too highly of myself, what happens? I may feel nobodier! I may think God *wants* me to feel nobodish.

Christian theologians have now realized that we shouldn't lump everyone together. Maybe someone *should* confess their sin of pride—after all, they go about telling people what to do as if they know the truth, or they think they are the center of the world, and they don't consider other viewpoints. They are sinning—being prideful.

However, others may doubt their own value, barely say what they want or what their views are. Why should they confess being too prideful? They need to confess **not having enough pride**.

What Andrew Park added to the mix in the discussion of sin is that we Christians should focus on the *underside* of sin—the experience of being sinned against.

Jesus noticed. He saw bent over people. He cared for the poor, those in pain. Yes, he also challenged those who were so preoccupied with themselves that they were not seeing these poor and bent-over people. Jesus did both. He named sin; he also saw and named han, suffering.

“Han” is a Korean word and doesn't really refer to one person's mistake in getting a name wrong when introducing another. “Han” usually refers to very long-term, often generational, pain, pain that is often due to oppression or injustice. When I “googled” “han” to see whether it is a word that has made it into regular language, I noticed a January 5<sup>th</sup> *LA Times* reference from last year, in which “han” was described as “A complex feeling . . . for South Koreans *han* is *as* amorphous a notion as love or hate: intensely personal, yet carried around collectively, . . . a badge of suffering tempered by a sense of resiliency.” Historically, Koreans were dominated by other countries, China, then Japan, for decades; collectively they were sinned against. They shared an experience of “frustrated hope, a collapsed feeling of pain . . . resentful bitterness, a wounded heart.”<sup>3</sup> Other groups, families, and individuals have also experienced this deep pain that is due to sin toward them over a long period: Native Americans, Jews in the Holocaust, Gays and Lesbians in numerous cultures, various populations forced to be slaves, and those suffering from mental health problems.

The sad truth is this: A person who lives with han does not just feel pain. They often seek revenge or are very resentful. One thing Andrew Park points out is that a person who is preoccupied with revenge and resentment is bent over, not free. That's part of han.

Many of you will recall that the one who wrote the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” John Newton, had engaged in “the practice of capturing West Africans to be sold as slaves to markets around the world.”<sup>4</sup> One day he began to read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis and that led to a conversion and a change in his way of life. He confessed his sin in his well-known lyrics: God “saved a wretch like me.” That's what **the sinner sings**.

Should a slave have sung the same song? What might a *slave* have sung? Of course any particular slave probably sinned, like anyone. But slaves experienced *han*--they were the recipients of sin. Perhaps the slave should have sung, “Amazing Grace, How Great Thou Art, *to free one bent like me*.” To free one bent like me.<sup>5</sup>

A straw is very light, hardly weighs anything at all. Just as weight is put on one straw at a time, until the “last” straw is too much. So, too, it seems quite reasonable that

straws can be taken off, starting with the last one, so that those of us who are bent over can stand straight up again—set free.

The important thing for us—here—is to stand up. We can stand up as individuals or groups to mistakes we have made and try to make amends. And, when it is we who have been bent over with pain, so that we experience han due to the sin of others, we can imagine Jesus noticing us and calling over to us, “Dude, you are set free from your han”—maybe even on a Sunday.

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<sup>1</sup> This is on the front bulletin cover:

Poem in the Methodist devotional booklet, *Alive Now*, abbreviated:

It began as an echo  
a hint. . .  
until it emerged  
as pain.  
Fleeting pain  
nagging pain  
aching pain. . .  
And then, I heard the dreaded ‘snap.’  
Snapped so hard that it  
snapped my mind  
snapped my will. . .  
Didn’t everybody hear the snap  
that sounded like thunder on the inside?. . .  
Perhaps no one will believe how awful it really is  
until I crawl through the rubble  
and locate *the very straw*  
*that broke my back.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Actually, sin had begun to be tampered with in the 1970’s. Theologian Valerie Saivang questioned why (in church, when confessions were written) we all had to confess the *sin of pride*. Just 40 years ago pride was the sin theologians thought of when they thought of sin. Valerie Saivang pointed out that many people do not have too much pride. In fact, they suffer from not-enough self-esteem cite Valerie Saivang, . . . and diffuseness as the biggest sin

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian Concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Osbeck, Kenneth W. *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions*. Grand Rapids: Kregal Pub., 1984, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, those who live with han all their lives are more likely to sin, when they have the opportunity. For example, those who are abused as children are more likely to be abusers when they are adults. At first we might think no one would want another to suffer what she or he did. Then, we realize, we behave as we have seen behavior. The cycle continues. Those who suffer han often sin, generating han in others. The cycle itself has to be stopped. That’s one reason we have to **name** not only sin, but also han, the under side of sin. One challenge—in our very practical life and in theology—is to deal with the fact that we do not divide easily into two teams that can battle it out in a Super Bowl: “sinners” and those with “han.”