

August 22, 2010  
Lectionary 21c  
Luke 13:10-17  
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### **GETTING A RISE**

I came late to *Glee*. Oh, I don't mean the state of joy, merriment or great delight—what the word “glee” means. And I don't mean singing in a glee club. I only started watching the hit TV show *Glee* last May. As I eagerly told friends and colleagues about the show, they all gave me a rather funny, disdainful look, as if *everyone* knew about Glee and was watching it every Tuesday night, thank you very much. I don't know if they were trying to get a rise out of me, or tease me that I wasn't appropriately up on popular culture. But seriously: how can a preacher today keep up with *everything* in the news, on television, at the movies, in novels, not to mention be up on the latest take on a particular scripture passage!

But I soon became a huge fan of *Glee*, the TV show. One of the characters, Artie, is in a wheelchair. He's a bit of a nerd, but all the fictional characters in the high school show choir, also known as a glee club, are a bit eccentric. Artie is a paraplegic manual wheelchair user. A car crash at age eight gave him a spinal cord injury.

In one episode Artie dreams that he can walk, even though he's told he probably never will. In a dream sequence, he stands up, he rises, he walks and dances up a storm in the middle of a mall. In another episode the director urges all the members of the choir to be in solidarity with Artie, so they do a spirited routine to “Proud Mary,” all of them wheeling about joyfully on stage in wheelchairs.

The episode got rave reviews except it got a rise out of one group. The actor who plays Artie in real life can walk. A number of actors with disabilities and their advocates wish that a person with disabilities had been cast in the role.

We could say that the woman in today's gospel is living with a major disability. She's bent over, the text says. Some kind of body-ailment causes her to crouch forward, unable to straighten herself up.

Jesus is drawn to the bent over woman and then sets her free from her infirmity. She rises. She stands up straight, and immediately praises God.

But the healing takes place on the Sabbath, and the whole scene creates quite a stir. The fact that Jesus bends the rule on a significant commandment gets quite a rise out of the leader of the synagogue. You wonder why Jesus couldn't have waited a few more hours until the Sabbath was over. Did he have to be so blatant, so in-your-face with his healing?

Is Jesus was making a point that people are more important than rules? When we are unbending in our attitudes and worldview, when our minds are made up, it often takes something that gets a rise out of us, to get our attention. One definition of sin is to be curved in on ourselves. In a broad way, we are all living with spiritual disabilities. Jesus invites us to stand, to rise, to look at each other, to see the needs of others, and the beauty all around us.

This fall I will be reading a book called *The Disabled God* for a class I will be taking. The title is intriguing, but I can see how it could get a rise out of some people. After all, isn't God perfection itself? How can God be disabled?

The book was written by theologian Nancy Eiesland, who at age 13 had had 11 operations for the congenital bone defect in her hips. Yet later in life she made the bold statement that she hoped that in heaven she would still be disabled. Why? Because her character and identity were formed by the challenges of her disability. It's who she is.

Because the body of the risen Christ still carries the wounds of physical impairment, Eiesland writes of the “disabled God.” It led her to realize that she is “whole” as she is, created in the image of God. She notes that two-thirds of the disabled do not attend church because their congregations do little or nothing to include them. Providing toilet access and a ramp alone is like thinking that taking down the “blacks only” signs would care of the racial issue in our country.

Eiesland calls people of faith to view the disabled not as passive victims or objects of pity, but as equal and active members of the body of Christ. Inviting us to embrace new images and ideas about disability, Eiesland imagined God pattering about in a “puff” wheelchair, the kind that quadriplegics drive with their own breath.

My mother has lived with a disability since her late teens when she contracted polio. Yet on her birthday, at age 73, she told me she was grateful for the simple things she can still do: get in and out of the bathtub, climb stairs, walk with a cane or walker, and load her scooter into the car by herself.

What is the good news for the fictional character Artie, for people like Nancy Eiesland or my mother, for all of us, with our own disabilities, whether they be physical, emotional, spiritual, or mental?

Christ continues to come to set people free from bondage, fear, shame, or isolation. Sometimes this inclusive, liberating word will get a rise out of folks. After all, things don't stay the same. Jesus opens up minds and hearts. Barriers come down.

And whether we are in a wheelchair, whether we walk with a cane, whether we walk or run long distances, whether we dance with our legs, our hands, or our eyes—we hold our heads high. We are whole just as we are. And that alone, is a reason to stand up or sit up straight. And to praise God.