

Being With

The exercise was pretty basic, and perhaps a little ornery on my part, but intended to bring into sharp, kinesthetic, visceral focus the harsh reality of the story I was about to tell for a group of women at a weekend retreat. That story was Luke 13's Bent Over Woman, a tale of a woman who was unable to stand up straight, a condition she had suffered from for 18 long years.

So, to set the stage for the experience, I asked for three volunteers (we'll call them the "guinea pigs") who considered themselves to be in good physical shape. I pretty quickly got three raised hands. I then asked for three "school marms," women who liked to follow the rules and who didn't have a problem helping others follow them as well. These volunteers were a little harder to recruit but I finally got three, at which point I took them into another room to more fully explain their role in private: The three guinea pigs were going to bend over, with their backs close to perpendicular to the ground, for 18 minutes (although, no one but the school marms would know how long this was going to last). This wasn't going to be easy for them. They were going to be tempted to straighten up, even a little, so the school marms' job was to make sure that didn't happen by gently pressing down on the back of their partnered guinea pig until they were perpendicular again.

Reuniting everyone in the main room, I simply explained that we were going to spend some time mingling around with each other, discussing the questions projected onto the screen. The guinea pigs were instructed to bend over, the school marm partners took up their posts next to them, and the 18-minute timer began.

What happened almost immediately was that one of the school marms herself, a 77 year old, bent over and remained in that position with *her* back perpendicular to the ground, *the entire 18 minutes!* She engaged her partner in conversation, eye-to-eye, companionship with her for the duration side-by-side. It was stunning. Throughout the 18 minutes, others would occasionally bend low to *briefly* interact with one of the three guinea pigs (plus one school marm), but would then pretty quickly relieve themselves of the discomfort by straightening up and moving on to talk with someone else who was standing erect.

Afterwards, during the group debriefing of the experience, everyone learned that she had *not* been instructed to do that. So, when asked why she had voluntarily decided to put herself in that uncomfortable position for 18 minutes (a length of time she had been privy to) she very matter-of-factly shared that she never likes to ask someone to do something she's not willing to do herself. She also told us that she volunteers at a nursing home and that when assisting a resident in getting from point A to point B with their walker, she'd learned that it didn't do much good to stand behind them and push. So she had learned to walk beside them, holding onto the side bar of their walker and to gently companion them along the way, side-by-side. They could easily talk with each other this way and there was an equitable nature to this approach that did away with a lopsided power differential of person-helping-another-person-in-need and spoke more of friends on equal footing.

I asked if during the 18 minutes she had ever had to gently push her partner back down to the perpendicular position. Nope, not once. Perhaps there hadn't been quite as much of a temptation or urge for her guinea pig to join the physical reality of the majority of the room because the loneliness of being "an other" had been at least somewhat diminished by a partner willing to jump into the "other" role herself for the very purpose of making sure she wasn't alone. Or maybe the 18 minutes went by more quickly because of having someone to talk to so the discomfort was more manageable. (At the beginning of the reflection time I had asked the guinea pigs how long they thought the experiment had lasted. The companioned guinea pig said 10-15 minutes; one of the other guinea pigs said 30!) Or maybe misery really does love company. All I know is that the other two guinea pigs had a much more difficult time—understandably so—and were much more vocal in their discontent!

I feel like we witnessed a modern parable lived out in real time in our midst. The applications to our own lives are obvious: meet people where they are; companion them as equals, side-by-side and eye-to-eye; a gentle approach can be more effective than a forceful one; and on and on. I think that Jesus would be proud. After all, he was the living embodiment of all this as Emmanuel—God (truly, and in every way) with us.

