

Christine de Pizan has been called Europe's first professional woman writer. Her 30-year career spanned from 1399-1429. One of her famous quotes is, "[A] person whose head is bowed and whose eyes are heavy cannot look at the light." Our Gospel this morning tells of a woman whose head is perpetually bowed because she has spent the past 18 years struggling with arthritis or, perhaps, osteoporosis. Whatever the case, she has spent nearly two decades only seeing a few feet in front of herself. She has not had the ability to look around and see all the world has to offer. In a way, she has felt the weight of the world on her shoulders.

Do you ever get up in the morning feeling that way? "It's another day and I'm just not feeling it." Some days it's hard to get motivated. There have been Sunday mornings when I just would have liked to pull the covers over my head rather than get up, come to church, and share the "good news." Thankfully, I am always met by the people of the congregation and things change. Then I get excited about having the best job in the world. Still, there are days when I preach about hope and love and look at the world wondering why there isn't a bit more of both out there. The weight of the world seems to be on my shoulders. I am bent over and see just a short distance in front of my feet. I miss what is out there to be seen if only I will straighten up and look around.

I want to tell you the story of a remarkable woman who died almost exactly a year ago at the age of 90. I'm sure some of you knew Lois Olsen. Lois, the daughter of a pastor, decided early on to go into the mission field. It was her dream to be a missionary in China. She completed a degree in nursing in Madison and went to Yale to study Chinese. Just as she was about to leave, the Communist government closed China to missionaries. Initially, Lois was bent over with disappointment. Instead of China, the Evangelical United Brethren sent her to Sierra Leone in Africa where she was in charge of a dispensary and maternity unit. Lois fell in love with the people there. Some of the women had to walk four to five miles home within 24 hours of giving birth. She was truly a miracle worker there. In the 1960's she contracted a bad case of malaria and had to return to the United States. Again, she faced great disappointment and could have become bent over again. Instead, she earned a master's degree in nursing from Marquette University and went on to study midwifery at the University of Mississippi. She became the first certified midwife in Wisconsin in 1971. She went on to work in two hospitals as a midwife and taught in the UWM nursing program. Later, she returned to her beloved Africa where she spent six months teaching in a nursing school in Kenya and provided continuing education in Cameroon, Liberia, Kenya, and Zambia. I came to know her when I first came to Wisconsin. She worked tirelessly to preserve and pass on the history of the Evangelical Association, the Brethren in Christ, and the Methodists of Wisconsin. She stood up straight and looked at the light for 90 years.

Lois' story reminds me a bit of Jeremiah's story. God touched her life at every step of the journey. Lois knew, without a doubt, that "before [God] formed [her] in the womb [God] knew [her], and before [she was] born [God] consecrated [her]." In the Jeremiah reading we hear Jeremiah's objections about being too young. Jeremiah had definite ideas about what he was going to do, but God thought otherwise. "Do not say, 'I am only a boy,' for you shall go to all to whom I send you." Lois had it in mind that she would go to China, but God thought otherwise. Upon arriving and working in Sierra Leone, Lois spent several years working and loving the people. She intended to stay on, but, once again, God had other plans.

This is not a story of God usurping free will. It is a story of the close relationship God desired with Jeremiah and Lois – the same close relationship that God desires with you and with me. It is about the kind of bond that gives us the courage to say, "Here I am, Lord, send me." It is a willingness to try something new, to step out in faith and try something where we are not quite sure of the outcome.

Sometimes we, as the church, are guilty of a lack of vision. We know that God calls us to make a difference in the world, but we look around, see all the problems, and the church feels the weight of the world on her shoulders and bends over to only see what is immediately before us. What we see, in that case, are the problems. We complain that the building that houses us requires so much upkeep. There isn't enough money to do what we want. There are fewer people in worship this year than there were 10 years ago/ 20 years ago/ 30 years ago. We get a collective case of "Woe is me."

Chris Tomlin, a Christian songwriter, points out something interesting found in the 11th chapter of the book of Acts. Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch. "So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people, and it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called 'Christians.'" They took on the name "Christian" from people who were watching how they behaved. They modelled the life of Christ. Yesterday, on that great theological source, Facebook, I saw a mem that said, "As a Christian, my calling is clear. In this life I don't get to play God, I get to model Jesus." When Jesus was asked what the greatest and most important commandment is, it came down to one word: *LOVE*. He expanded it to include love of God, neighbor, and self. That pretty much takes care of loving everyone. Paul and Barnabas were called Christian because of the love they shared with the people and the church at Antioch was able to stand up straight. The church at Antioch was a church made up of Gentiles. It was this church that was the example used by Paul when he defended bringing Gentiles into the faith before the church at Jerusalem. In other words, being recognized as a "Christian" at Antioch was a big deal.

When you think about it, this is an exciting time to be the church. The danger for us comes when we collectively bend over and stare at our feet. Many churches have feet that have turned to clay and they are not moving into the incredible future that God intends for us. I get excited when I begin to think about the possibilities for us. I had a meeting this week with a woman to explore the possibilities of a portion of our Sunday services being televised weekly. That would be a huge undertaking. Who knows? It may or may not happen. We could underwrite the tuition and expenses of an Africa University student who might just change his village and his country. Who knows? It may or may not happen. We can enter into partnership with other churches in Milwaukee to make a difference in our troubled city? Who knows? One thing I know for sure after spending less than two months with you – you will not sit still and stare at your feet!

Last Sunday I talked about the racial tension and violence in our city. I was pleased that so many people thanked me for delivering a troubling word. One person asked, “What can I do to make a difference?” The problems we have were not created overnight and there is not a simple, easy solution. Last Monday, about 2 dozen United Methodist clergy met with our bishop and talked about a response from the church. Too much of the conversation included putting band aids on the problems. We’ve done that for the past 30 years and it has not helped. There are many things we can do, but we need to learn what will help rather than hurt the situation. We need to enter into partnership with those who feel marginalized in our city. There is little to do if we are not in relationship with the larger community. There are some fairly immediate things like mentoring in the schools. It is about building relationships. We have to be ready to be uncomfortable. This week I signed up for a class that deals with race, privilege, and the difficulty we have in seeing where our responses to things are sometime unhelpful.

Another member said, last Sunday, “I feel like we are back in the ‘60s again with demonstrations and rioting, and I don’t like it.” I have to admit, there is an air of ‘60s radicalism out there. I guess the church will have to become radical in expressing the love of God. That is what the church at Antioch found. If people were going to call them Christian, they had to love God, neighbor, and themselves.

A few weeks ago I shared a Fred Craddock story with you about going ‘marveling.’ I’m going to share another one of his stories with you.

Used to have a kid down home who’d believe anything you’d tell him. You could say, “The schoolhouse burned down. We’re not having school tomorrow.”

“Oh boy!” He’d believe it.

“They’re giving away free watermelons down at the town hall.”

“Really? Free watermelons?” He’d go running off.

“Did you know the president of the United States is coming to our town tomorrow?”

“He is? Really? Whoopee!” He just believed everything.

I remember once there was an evangelist who came to our town, and he said to that kid, “God loves you and cares for you and comes to you in Jesus Christ.”

And do you know, that kid believed it? He actually believed it.ⁱ

Do you believe it? Do you believe that God loves you and cares for you and comes to you in Jesus Christ? Do you believe that because God loves you, we ought to love one another? Do you believe that love for God, neighbor, and ourselves can transform the world? Don't look at your feet. Stand up straight. Look around. We are surrounded by the light of Christ!

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 53