

Set Free

Luke 13:10-17

The woman in our story reminds me of my story – at times crippled emotionally and spiritually. The woman crippled with a spirit for eighteen years and unable to stand up straight did not ask for healing. Instead, Jesus called to her and set her free from her ailment by laying hands on her. Her response was to stand up straight and begin praising God. It is striking that she did not ask for healing and no one petitioned Jesus on her behalf. Over the years, she had become accustomed, if not resigned, to her long and serious illness, which was attributed to Satan. For eighteen years this unnamed woman had strained to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. For eighteen years she had become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world had been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright could see with just a glance. She was used to this, and no one questioned her fate. Initially Jesus made a pronouncement that she had been *apolelytai*, "released" or "set free," from the weakness that had crippled her. Yet the healing was not manifest until Jesus laid his hands on her. In this instance Jesus' two-part healing allowed him to touch a woman who was unclean, and thereby restored her socially as well as physically. Touching said symbolically that Jesus did not care for his own sake that those he healed were viewed as unclean, and that he would not allow the threat of the conveyance of uncleanness to keep him from redeeming the wounded and marginalized. His touch represented fellowship for those whose ailments may have denied them human contact; Jesus' touch was their initial welcome back into community. **Rodney S. Sadler Jr. and Emilie M. Townes**

Instead of being happy for the woman and praising God that she had been set free, the leader of the synagogue got offended that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath. But why was he so offended? One emphasis in the Old Testament concept of Sabbath urges Israel to rest from all work because God crowned creation with a holy day of rest (Gen. 2:2-3). The Lord rested from the work of creation to bless and consecrate the Sabbath; therefore the people of Israel shall not work on the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8-11). In our text, Jesus chose another, complementary emphasis of the Old Testament (Deut. 5:12-15), where the Sabbath commandment commanded the people of the covenant to observe the day and keep it holy in recognition of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. In the latter emphasis on Sabbath observance and the practice of holiness, the people undertook a holy work. In either case—of complete rest or of active Sabbath practice—the requirements of life asked what relinquishing work and what active holiness might mean for human beings.

The Pharisees, who emphasized the prohibition of any work, follow the Mishnah's concessions that allowed an owner of cattle to take them to water on the Sabbath, provided that the cattle carried no burdens. The communal function of both human rest from work to acknowledge the Lord's sanctification of the Sabbath and the human activity of observance and keeping the holiness of the Sabbath was to give institutional and communal foundation to both tables of the law: to honor and worship God alone and to render justice to the neighbor. This Deuteronomic understanding of holiness is at the heart of the Old Testament prophetic traditions.

In this account of the crippled woman in the synagogue on the Sabbath, Luke emphasized the latter understanding of the Sabbath as refraining from work. Jesus elicited rage because the Pharisees controlled the Sabbath with their work of cumbersome requirements that imprisoned and enslaved people with longstanding bondage. A religious observance that was to remember and honor the liberation of

God's people thus became in the hands of the Pharisees a means of social control and oppression. A spirit of bondage lived in the woman and restricted her independence and freedom to live in strength and fullness.

Think of the busload of people who left hell on a holiday to heaven in C. S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce*. One of them, in her earthly life, was a washerwoman in Golder's Green, wringing her livelihood from the soil of the clothing of those who hired her for a pittance. In her life in the kingdom of God, she was herself clothed in a white gown and a tiara, with ladies holding her train and laughing in the bright sheen of God's new day. Most of the people who boarded the bus for their holiday in heaven away from hell, instead of staying, chose to return to the lower world. The return trip was difficult, because the journey back to hell required them to find what appeared to be a small crack in the expansive green pastures of the realm of the kingdom, and to travel back in a shrinking coach that crushed passengers bent on returning to hell into insufferably cramped quarters until they themselves grew small enough to have wide spaces between them. The crippled woman in Luke, however, stayed on holiday.

Jesus challenged the habits of Pharisaic work. Even they led their ox and their donkey from the manger to water, he said. If the animals were free to drink, then how much more should a daughter of Abraham in the kingdom of God receive freedom for life? She was an heir of the covenant of promise. The freedom from bondage is Jesus' aim in his healing the woman. Satan was the chief spirit of the powers that oppress the earth. Jesus himself confronted the devil in his temptations ([Luke 4:1-13](#)). The crowds came to him for healing from their diseases and freedom from the spirits that trouble them ([Luke 6:18](#); [7:2](#); [9:1](#), [37-42](#)).

In the Galilee, the twelve male disciples accompanied Jesus, "as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, ... Joanna, ... and Susanna, and many others" ([Luke 8:2-3](#)) who provided for Jesus

and the male disciples with their resources. It was Mary, Joanna, and the other women who accompanied him to his crucifixion and bore witness to the male disciples. Here in our scripture, we find that this woman who had been in bondage for eighteen years was a daughter of the covenant made through Abraham with Sarah and that she was one of the many other daughters of Abraham who find freedom from oppression and physical disease in Jesus' exercise of life-giving and freedom-giving touch.

People who witnessed Jesus' casting out the spirit of bondage and the healing of the arthritic contortion of the woman's body responded in either of two ways. The Pharisees, whose Sabbath practice was to patronize and exercise power over people and at the same time to neglect their burdens, were put to shame. The vast majority of those who witnessed the new health rejoiced at all the wonderful things that Jesus did. The Lord's true Sabbath is God's giving the freedom and rejoicing to such people as the unnamed woman who finds freedom in Jesus' healing touch.

Jesus' practice and teaching implies for us our memory of God's freeing power in Christ over the bondage at work in the world through oppressive burdens on God's people. This unnamed woman becomes a testimony to the freedom of the people of God from demonic oppression and the crippling burden of disease and anything else that robs God's people of full life. **Charles E. Raynal**

So, like our sister, I have been given freedom because of a declaration and a touch from my savior. Whom the Lord sets free is free indeed!

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