

Luke 13:10–17

Set Free

In today's gospel reading, Luke offers a familiar story, that of the Sabbath-day healing of a woman who had been bent over for eighteen years and the ensuing hostile response by the synagogue because Jesus healed her on the Sabbath.

To be in the synagogue on Sabbath in that time and place was to be at the very centre of the Jewish faith. This is where life, faith, and community merged in a wondrous celebration of God's presence and promise. It would have been a joyous, awesome, and holy place.

Is that the story for this woman? Not likely. She's borne this affliction for 18 years ... for almost a generation.

Anyhow; the woman simply enters the synagogue. The synagogue leader suggests later that she has specifically come for healing, but we are not told that.

Perhaps she comes regularly to the synagogue, in the hopes of catching even a fleeting moment of belonging to this sacred community.

This day, Jesus notices her. And what does he do?

He sees her, calls her over, and declares that she is healed – more correctly, free.

The story would be astonishing enough if it ended at that point. Someone who has been in astonishing pain and torment for an eternity is now healed; cause for celebration! But there is more.

The synagogue leader is indignant. "If you want healing, come back another day," he declares. Jesus (rightly so) calls him on his hypocrisy. "You would untie your ox or donkey on the Sabbath; shouldn't I loosen the bonds on this woman?"

The implication in the question is clear: isn't she worth just as much – indeed, more – than your farm animals?

But the message here is in fact goes much deeper than a simplistic "people are at least as important as animals."

In the deformed condition in which this woman had found herself for so long, she had also become religiously marginalized. People with such conditions were not allowed in the temple, period. It's a bit surprising she was even allowed in the synagogue, and perhaps she would not have been there except for the fact that Jesus was teaching that day. In the synagogue, she would have been seated near or at the very back of the room, with the other women, who were not permitted to participate actively in the worship offered up front by the men. Indeed, they were not even supposed to speak.

Jesus, as teacher, would have been seated front and centre.

So when Jesus sees this woman and calls out to her while he's teaching, every eye in the place is transferred from him to her, from the very front to the very rear, from the one most valued to the one least valued. Jesus reinforced this shift by walking through the male worshipers and then into the area where the women were gathered in the back and laying his hands on her. Immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God; that is, worshipping—out loud! A woman who had been crippled for eighteen years was now standing (like the men) and praising God (as only men were to do), all at the instigation of the guest rabbi that day, Jesus of Nazareth.

Luke doesn't say it, but any Jewish reader or anyone familiar with Jewish synagogue practices would have known it. The synagogue leader wasn't just mad about breaking a rule about not doing work on the Sabbath. That was a convenient law to pull out, because everyone knew it and he would seem to have some ground to stand on in interpreting it this way. But this was barely about Sabbath at all.

It was about control.

Not just about control in act of worship.

This was about the control of the culture as he knew it.

The synagogue leader was indignant because Jesus had just shown up and broken the caste system of the entire religious culture, a caste system the synagogue leader and all the men in the synagogue benefited from at the expense of the women and any others who had been suffering for years without any possibility even to *ask* for relief.

The function of Torah never was intended to be about keeping people in “their” places—which really means keeping “lesser” people in the places the most powerful want them to stay!

Instead, as the central story of Exodus declares, Torah is all about setting people free for praise and service to God and neighbor

Jesus will not tolerate the religious leader’s response. Jesus will not take "No" for an answer! Jesus has no hesitation in declaring the woman’s inherent worth and value.

It is no surprise that “the entire crowd was rejoicing” in response. If the Sabbath is to honour God, then what greater honour is there than to restore someone to wholeness?

Psalm 71:1–6 contains the words of someone who has experienced being rescued by God ... restored to wholeness. You can almost hear the unnamed woman from the synagogue proclaiming these words, and singing her praises to God.

The power of God is great – it has created the universe, it has rescued people in times of distress, it shakes evil from the world.

Even more so, however, it proclaims the worth and value of each one of us. The almighty God, who can do all things, cares about each and every one of God’s creatures.

No person is beyond the compassion of God. Can you recall a time when *you* felt ignored and abandoned? When have you felt God reaffirming your worth and dignity?

This story of healing serves as a powerful reminder that in God's eyes ...in God's compassionate heart, all people are of value.

All people are worthy of enjoying the wholeness of life. All people. For in Christ, God is the healer of hearts, the healer of bitter memories, the mender of brokenness, the healer. But to use Henri Nouwen's famous phrase, Christ is the "wounded healer".

In his suffering, on a cruel cross, Christ takes upon himself, the brokenness, the frailty, the torment, the pain of this world; this world of which you and me are a part. Christ has walked as we have walked, suffered as we have suffered.

In his life, death, his resurrection and his on-going Spirit presence, Christ sets us free, as we come to him In faith, in vulnerability, in repentance, in worship. Christ, the healer of hearts takes on his wounded self -our burdens, our imperfections ... and on the cross, sets us free.

And when we are set free by Christ, the healer of hearts, of minds, of relationships, of memories - we are free, we are free indeed!

PRAYER

When people put me down, O God, remind me of my value. When people put others down, empower me to speak out on their behalf. When people put themselves down, help me to assure them that all of us are your children, loved wholly and unconditionally by you. Amen.