

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 61:1-4

-pg 691 OT

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

“He Sets the Captives Free”

*“And just then there appeared a woman with a **SPIRIT** (with a spirit) that had crippled her for eighteen years.” (repeat). Wow! That’s what it says. I have read this passage many times, and I have not really until this time noticed THAT before.*

We have together, looked at this story before, and we’ve seen it for what it most certainly is, not simply one of Jesus’ wonderful stories of healing, but an emancipation story. It is that! It IS a story about freedom from bondage. In this healing story on the Sabbath, Jesus does not argue with the religious leader about the law, telling him that “The Sabbath was made for mankind, not mankind for the Sabbath.” He does that elsewhere in Scripture. No, he argues property and covenant. He answers, *“You hypocrites! “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”* He actually refers to this woman as a “daughter of Abraham”, knowing that only men were referred to as “sons of Abraham”. He is, in essence, saying this woman, all women, are equal to men. He is saying that they are more valuable not only than the ox and donkey, but more valuable than the property that they are thought to be. They are entitled to all the grace and goodness of the Abrahamic covenant. Yes, this is radical. It’s big. It’s one of my favorite healing stories because of it.

Feet, paths, doorways...For 18 years this woman has not seen a sunrise or the eyes and faces of the people around her. Everything must have been difficult for her: sitting, eating, drinking, walking, undressing—and relentlessly embarrassing; it was socially isolating. She was alone, always. *“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.”* When Jesus speaks to her and then touches her, she stands tall with dignity, a child of God. She has a new view of the world, freed from what has previously tied her down. Yes, this story is about freedom.¹ It’s wonderful and big. But wow! I’d never before seen until this time of study, why she had been crippled! Luke tells us that the nature of this woman’s problem is that she had a SPIRIT of infirmity.

¹ Mark Trotter. “Now Stand up Straight” <https://sermons.com/sermon/now-stand-up-straight/1353262> (accessed 8-19-16)

In Biblical times there was not the understanding that we have today of an inseparable link between mind and body. However, we know, and certainly Jesus knew, that the mind and body are in fact one. While there are actually disorders described in the medical field wherein mental stress is truly converted into physical symptoms (i.e. conversion reactions), we all know that our mental or emotional ill health can be a detriment to our physical health. For instance, any severe traumatic event can cause physical symptoms including fast heart rate, high blood pressure, body aches, nausea, ulcers, insomnia and lethargy. The lethargy alone can then result in withdrawn behavior, immobility, eventual muscle wasting, weakness and then of course, slumped posture, and all that goes with that. Over the years the relationship, the intertwining of the mind and the body, has become reflected in our speech...examples: “he was paralyzed by fear” “she died of a broken heart”, “they worried themselves sick”.²

There is no way to know what caused the problem in the woman’s spirit originally. Possibly her physical illness was the result of sin and guilt. Maybe she did something she REALLY regretted, OR possibly she was suffering from what someone else did to her which caused her pain or enormous shame, such pain in her culture that she withdrew and began to lower her head, and then her shoulders, and then her back, until she was finally simply crippled.... captive, in a physical condition in which she was then very easily looked over, and no doubt, cast aside, made to feel invisible. She could only look people in the knees which, as Rev. Jim Somerville so rightly says, “may have been better for her than looking them in the eyes, for knees don’t look back. Knees don’t mock or accuse”.³

But Jesus sees her, not simply her bent over condition, but her. And he calls her to himself. He does that with all of us, you know. He sees our pain, the torture we bring on ourselves or the pain that gets thrust upon us, all that stuff we try to hide from others. And then Jesus says to her, “*Woman, you are set free from your infirmity.*” And he lays hands on her and she stands up straight. The word used is *anakuptō*, to straighten up, to look up, to be cheered. The woman

² Jim Somerville. “*Stooped Over, Straightened Up*” A Sermon for Every Sunday. <https://asermonforeverysunday.com/sermons/c39-the-fourteenth-sunday-after-pentecost/> (accessed 8-25-19).

³ Somerville.

previously could not look up; she could not be cheered. But now she begins praising God. In fact, I would imagine that as she begins to feel strength come back into her spine, as the ache in her muscles disappears, and as she finally gets to see the faces of people around her, she begins to dance and the psalms of praise that she knows by heart come to her lips. When her eyes meet Jesus' and she sees nothing but love and assuredness and acceptance in them, she might sing Ps 103... *Bless the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all his benefits---who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy.*"⁴

This word, *anakuptō*, is found in Luke only one other time and that is when Jesus is speaking about the coming of the Son of Man, Luke 21:28, "*Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*" As Jill Duffield says, "*This miracle story is about all those who were bent double but now have cause to stand tall in eager and hopeful anticipation, because the Son of Man brings good news, release, freedom, and God's favor to those so burdened and broken and disregarded that they haven't dared look others in the eye.*"⁵

Jesus performs the miracle on a Sabbath morning during worship. He annoys the worship leader in doing this. He causes a ruckus because things are now not so decent and orderly, but what better place and time to do the Lord's work, right? Do you remember another time when he caused a ruckus during worship in a synagogue, not so unlike this one? It was his hometown synagogue. Do you remember the text he was reading from when he upset everyone? Well, it was the from the scroll of Isaiah wherein it was prophesied that the coming Messiah was going to "*bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" *Isa 61:1-2* Well, that day, the hometown people did not get it, even when he told them that the Scripture was fulfilled in him. But this day, in this synagogue, they do. Yes, they understand what is going on. They know exactly. For they are ordinary folk, living their lives, like this woman, like

⁴ Karoline Lewis. "*Daughters of Abraham*" <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=4699> (accessed 8-19-16).

⁵ Jill Duffield. 11th Sunday after Pentecost <https://pres-outlook.org/2019/08/11th-sunday-after-pentecost-august-25-2019/> (accessed 8-19-24).

you and me, working hard, caring for their families, but each of them burdened in some way or another, needing to hear that they too can stand straight with dignity for they are children of God, beloved, freed....redeemed by this One. *“The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing”*. You bet they were.

Friends, if, by chance, today, on this Sabbath day, you are feeling as if you are bound by a spirit of infirmity, by guilt, by shame, by fear, by despair, by self-loathing or inferiority, by defeat or grief. If you have been made to feel less worthy and weighed down by an abusive or bullying other, or maybe it's a circumstance that is causing you to be bent over...financial debt, creeping age and disease, overwork and exhaustion, family crisis, challenging school or work demands, worry over children or parents, addiction... be assured today that Jesus can see your pain, your captivity and can here, today, even now, release you of that burden, that pain. He can lift that burden from your shoulders, carry it for you, and you can be free in this life and the life to come. Your life matters....and your life matters...and your life matters. All that is needed is that you open your mind and heart to the one.... who sets the captives free.

To God be the glory. Amen and Amen.

In 1678, John Bunyan wrote a very powerful book called Pilgrim's Progress. During the later 18th and the 19th centuries it became regarded in Britain as essential family reading, and has been claimed as one of the 10 most published books of all time. It's one of my husband's favorites. In the book John Bunyan tells the story of a man named Christian and his journey from The City of Destruction (representing earth) to the Celestial City (representing heaven). Along the way he meets characters such as Pliable, Obstinate and Hopeful who, as their names suggest, embody particular qualities that may help or hinder any Christian in his or her journey to heaven. Well, the character, Christian, carries on his back, as he journeys from his city, a huge burden, which represents his sin. It weighs him down and bends him over, making him stagger under its weight. But along the way, Christian reaches a place where a cross has been erected, and at the foot of the cross the heavy load falls from his back and falls into a bottomless pit behind him. The message is clear that at the foot of the cross the Christian is set free of the burdens they carry.⁶

⁶ <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-pilgrims-progress-by-john-bunyan> (accessed 8-22-19).