

## Set Free

The whole village is buzzing. On the way to synagogue, he's all anyone can talk about. They can't wait to get a look at him. They can't wait to hear what he has to say! This traveling rabbi. Someone's heard that he's from *Galilee*, of all places. From the little town of Nazareth. Someone else has heard that he brings a new teaching. That—unlike the scribes—he teaches with authority. And today he's coming to *their* town, visiting *their* house of worship!

Hurrying along, excited, they make their way to the synagogue. They take their accustomed places. Before long, the guest of honor appears. And is seated up front. Front and center. This rabbi. All eyes are fixed on him. All attention's focused on *him*.

When *she* enters the synagogue. Who is she, anyway? Luke doesn't tell us much about this woman. But what he *does* tell us is the first thing that others notice about her. It's what has defined her. Her back is bent. She's stooped over. For eighteen

years—according to Luke—a spirit has possessed her. Crippled her. Disabled her.

The thing is, the law of her people forbids anyone with a disability from worshiping in the temple. The Law of Moses clearly states that no one with a deformity or a disease may enter the sanctuary or approach the altar.

Now on this particular day, she's not in the Jerusalem temple. She's in the local synagogue. But we don't know if she's even permitted to be *there*. This painfully disabled woman may very well be excluded, cut off even, from her own faith community. She's ritually unclean. And demeaned. Shunned and shamed.

You can probably guess what's going through her mind. As soon as they see me—she wonders—will the whispers start? *What's she doing here? Who let her in?*

She doesn't make a sound. She finds a place in the very back of the room, where no one even notices her. Well, there is *One* who notices. She hears him call to her. She hears him invite her to come to him.

And she begins moving toward him. Moving toward this One whose name is Jesus. Moving slowly, because that's the only way she *can* move. It feels like the longest walk of her life. Because to get to him, she has to walk past all the silent women in the back of the synagogue. And the men, who are all up front. She can feel every eye upon her—the object of stares and glares. She knows they're thinking: *What's the matter with her—doesn't she know her place?*

Her “place,” my sisters and brothers, has been in bondage. Imagine what her life's been like. Imagine with me, just for a moment, having a crooked back and being unable to stand upright. For eighteen years you've been earthbound. For eighteen years you've been able to cast your gaze in only one direction: downward. For eighteen years you've seen only dirt and refuse and creeping things. For eighteen years you've been unable to look up—up at red-gold sunsets, up at purple mountains, up at the starlit firmament. For eighteen years you've been unable to look into the face of a loved one—except sideways, out of the corner of your eye. For eighteen years you've been locked inside a prison of pain. If you are this person.

As a person with a disability, and as a woman in this first-century Near Eastern culture, she's *doubly* diminished. *Doubly* oppressed.

She's nameless. We don't even know her name. But Jesus does! And compassion fills his loving heart. As always, he takes the initiative. The initiative of grace. Jesus reaches out. Calls out. Invites her to come into his presence and to open herself to his power. Because Jesus knows *exactly* who she is. Knows her to be a precious child of God! It was God who took her from her mother's womb. It was God who *knew* her. Just as God knew Jeremiah, even before his birth.

This woman is one of God's chosen people. This woman is acknowledged and honored by Jesus as a daughter of Abraham. Jesus confers on this woman a new status—as a welcomed and valued member of the community of faith. As a person of dignity and worth.

Jesus blesses her with a few short words: *Woman, you are set free!* With just a few short words, Jesus transforms her life. With his healing hands laid on her, Jesus releases her from all that binds her. Jesus gives her the courage and the strength and the freedom to stand up straight and tall. To rise up and to lift up

her voice in thanksgiving, in praise of the God of healing, the God she loves, the God in whom she rejoices.

But there is someone in the synagogue who's *not* rejoicing: A leader, outraged because Jesus has healed on this, the sabbath day.

By the time of Jesus, scribe and Pharisee have taken the fourth commandment, the instruction to hallow the sabbath, and reworked it into a complicated, nit-picky tangle of regulations—six hundred thirteen of them, to be exact—dictating precisely what can and cannot be done on the sabbath. For example: you can carry a bundle of firewood on the sabbath, but not more than a pre-determined distance. And that bundle of sabbath firewood cannot weigh more than a certain amount. If it does, that constitutes what is on the sabbath forbidden: work.

And so does *healing*—except in critical cases—constitute work. Even, apparently, the healing of a disabled woman. A woman on whom society has placed a value not much higher than the value of an animal.

But, Jesus insists, even animals are cared for on the sabbath. And on the sabbath, this *human being*, this woman, is released from her suffering.

On the sabbath, God rested after the work of creation and asks God's people—each one made in God's image—to rest, as God did, on the seventh day. The day we call Saturday. The good creation resonates in sabbath. And in sabbath, redemption, too, resonates. God redeemed the children of Israel, delivered them from slavery in Egypt. You and I too have been redeemed, by the One whom God raised from the dead on the first day of the week, the day we call Sunday. The sabbath for us who bear the name of Christ.

Christ sets this bound woman free. And Christ sets *us* free from the notion of sabbath as burden. From the notion of sabbath as *duty* to observe all sorts of limitations and restrictions on what can and cannot be done. Christ does away with boundaries established by the creature and not by the Creator.

Christ calls you and me to understand sabbath as a gift. As a time to enjoy and celebrate relationship with the One who made us. For Jesus himself teaches that people were not made for the sabbath; the sabbath was made for people!

What *better* day than the sabbath could there be for healing to take place? *Remember the sabbath day, God commands, and keep it holy.* Did you know that the word *heal* and the word

*holy* come from the same root? Both words, *heal* and *holy*, carry the connotation of wholeness. Wholeness is God's good intention and desire for human creatures. But in our human condition, there is brokenness.

In the created order, too, there is brokenness. Right behind the parsonage is a Catawba tree. You may have noticed it. If you pass by this tree in winter, its branches bleak and bare, you might wonder if it's even alive. Because there's something very different about this tree. Its trunk isn't perpendicular to the ground, like most tree trunks. No. The trunk of this tree emerges from the earth at an impossibly sharp angle. It's twisted. It's bent. I don't know what force of nature caused it to grow that way.

But God knows. God places wonders right before our eyes, all around us. Sometimes we overlook them. Sometimes we see them. And, sometimes, by the grace of God, we understand what it is that's being revealed to us.

Because this Catawba tree, this tree with a tortuous history, this tree that has struggled just to survive? The limbs of this tree—emerging from that grotesque trunk—these limbs reach straight up toward heaven. And come springtime, this tree

celebrates its life with thousands of blossoms a color of breathtaking loveliness. If, after service, you would like to see a photo of it, I have one to show you. I have never seen a more beautiful tree. It lifts up graceful, abundantly flowering branches in praise and thanksgiving to the One who made it. This tree glorifies the One who set it free.

Has there been a time in your life when it seemed filled with brokenness? When you knew you weren't growing in the right direction, but you didn't seem to be able to do anything about it? When you struggled? When every movement was painfully slow?

Beloved, the One who made you calls you to come close. The One who made you takes what in you is twisted, takes what in you is bent, and makes it straight. The One who made you touches you with hands of healing and, from all that binds you, releases you and sets you free.

Just as in Luke's Gospel, Christ Jesus sets a bent woman free, Christ sets you and me free to be whole.

Christ sets her free and sets *us* free from all the forces that would possess us. That would disable us. That would keep our gaze focused down on the earth and not up on the heavens. That

may have gripped us for long years during which we never dreamed of the power of Christ to deliver us from each and every one.

Christ sets a hurting woman free and sets *us* free from all the world's assigned statuses and applied labels. Sets us free from the need to put labels on others and sets us free from the labels others would place on us. Sets us free from labels like *poor*. Like *undeserving*. Like *old*. Like *unworthy*. Because in Christ, each human being has a *new* status—as a person of sacred worth. Each human being is a person for whom Christ died. In Christ, all of us are one.

Christ sets you free. Free to fling off every shackle. Free to laugh and sing and dance. Free to rejoice with a glad heart!

Christ sets you free. Free to stand up straight and tall. Free to look up. Free to praise God and to thank God for every gift that you've been given. Free to walk out these doors and to *use* your gifts in the loving service of God's eternal kingdom.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.