

A Woman's Liberation

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, August 21, 2022.

Luke 13:10-17

This morning's story begins with a woman. There was nothing particularly special about her. She was an ordinary woman. We don't know her name. We don't really know much about her at all. Like most women of her time, she probably worked hard, attending to the many, physically demanding tasks of running a household -- washing clothes, preparing meals, cleaning house, caring for children, working in the garden. It was back-breaking work -- literally. Bent over, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, eventually it got to be too much for her. It was more than her body could take. One day, her back just gave out.

We don't know how it happened exactly. She may have been bending over to pick up her wash basket. Or maybe she was weeding her vegetable garden. Perhaps she had been down on her hands and knees, washing the floor. Whatever she was doing, this time when she tried to get up, she couldn't. She was bent over, and as hard as she tried, she couldn't stand up straight. Her lower back just seemed frozen in place.

She thought that maybe it would ease up after awhile. With a little time, maybe her back muscles would relax and she would be able to stand up straight again. But time passed and she didn't get better. She may have sought out the help of healers, but if she did, none were able to help her. She remained stooped over, unable to stand up straight. Weeks turned into months. And months turned into years. Eventually, so much time had passed that she gave up hope of her back ever healing. She learned to live with her affliction, going about her daily life as best she could.

We encounter this woman in this morning's scripture reading eighteen years after her back gave out. It's the Sabbath day, and she shuffles into the back of a synagogue where Jesus happens to be the guest preacher. Jesus spots her and calls her forward, which probably causes quite a stir within the congregation. She slowly ambles up to the front of the synagogue, probably feeling embarrassed to have everyone's attention

focused on her. She probably also feels a little bit anxious and afraid, wondering why on earth Jesus has called her forward. The possibility that Jesus might heal her never even entered her mind. She'd given up on that possibility long ago.

The woman comes before Jesus, and he says to her: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." She probably couldn't believe her ears. "Did he say what I think he said?" she must have wondered. But before she has another moment to process Jesus' words, he lays his hands on her, and immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God: "I can stand! Oh my God! I can stand!" I imagine her there in front of the gathered congregation, with tears of joy streaming down her face, crying out: "Thank you God! Thank you, Jesus! Look, everyone, I can stand up straight! I've been healed! After 18 long years, I've been healed!"

It's a great story – a miraculous story! But it doesn't end there. No, it seems that the leader of the synagogue is not very happy about what has transpired. He is indignant, we are told, that Jesus -- his guest preacher (of all people) -- healed someone on the Sabbath, blithely violating one of the Ten Commandments right in front of the entire congregation!

The Fourth Commandment, you may recall, is about keeping Sabbath: "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

The leader of the synagogue feels compelled to remind the congregation of this. He says to them, over and over again: "there are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." Interestingly enough, he doesn't speak to Jesus directly. He speaks to the crowd as a whole.

Now, to be sure, there were some special circumstances when healing on the Sabbath could be permitted. The rabbis had agreed that healing could be allowed on the Sabbath in critical cases, in life-threatening emergencies, when treating someone immediately was a matter of life and death. But when it came to chronic conditions like the woman's ailment, there was no imminent danger to her health requiring that she

receive immediate care. She had been bent over for eighteen years! What was the rush? Jesus could certainly have waited until the next day to heal her.

But Jesus doesn't back down in the face of the synagogue leader's appeal to the Fourth Commandment. On the contrary, Jesus comes out swinging. "You hypocrites!" Jesus cries, referring to the leader of the synagogue and anyone who might side with him. "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?"

Jesus challenges his opponents to reason from the lesser to the greater. Look how you treat your animals on the Sabbath. Doesn't this woman -- a fellow human being, a daughter of Abraham -- deserve to be treated at least as well as you treat your animals? You free your animals from their bonds in order to lead them to water on the Sabbath. Why shouldn't this woman be set free from the bonds of her affliction on the Sabbath?

"When [Jesus] said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing." Chalk one up for Jesus!

The leader of the synagogue had cited the necessity of keeping the Sabbath, but Jesus countered that there was a greater necessity -- that of freeing a human being from whatever cripples, binds, or diminishes her.

It is important to point out that Jesus did more than heal the woman physically. He also restored her relationship to the community. Her illness would have caused her to be marginalized from the community. But Jesus reinstated her to legitimate membership in the community of Israel. Jesus gave the woman her dignity back. She was a daughter of Abraham! She could stand tall once again!

She was set free from the bonds of illness that had afflicted her for eighteen long years. For her, healing was a form of liberation. She was liberated from the chains of an oppressive affliction that had kept her imprisoned for almost two decades. And in her newfound freedom, the first thing she did was give thanks and praise to God.

Jesus was a liberator. Remember why he came? He tells us in chapter 4 of Luke, quoting Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Jesus was a liberator of both men and women, which, in a patriarchal, male-dominated society was saying something. He liberated and cared for a number of women, and they in turn cared for him. We know this from Luke chapter 8, which tells how "Jesus went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources."

Jesus raised the status of women in first-century society and in the kingdom of God. Time and time again, he lifted up women as good examples for others to emulate. Remember the woman who bathed Jesus' feet with her tears, dried them with her hair, and anointed them with expensive oil? Remember the persistent widow who kept coming to the judge asking for justice? Remember the poor widow who gave away all she had – two small copper coins? And remember that it was women who were first to discover the empty tomb on that first Easter morning.

Women's liberation didn't begin in the 1960s or 70s. Nor did it begin in the 19th century with the movement for women's suffrage. No, the liberation of women goes back centuries to Jesus' time and even before that. Indeed, one could argue that Jesus was a first-century feminist.

So, to all the women here this morning, whatever is weighing you down, whatever burdens you are bearing, whatever struggles you are wrestling with, bring them to Jesus. Cast your cares on him. Jesus wants to unburden you. Jesus wants to heal you. Jesus wants to make you whole. Jesus wants to set you free.

Stand tall and hold your heads up high, for you are daughters of Abraham. You are children of God! Amen!