

I.

*Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."*

If we call this a healing story, we miss Luke's subtle style. This is a freedom story. Jesus doesn't say, "Woman, you are healed," but, "Woman, you are set free."<sup>1</sup> For 18 years, she has only seen the dirt between her feet. She has not seen the future, or imagined it's possibilities. The text suggests that the crippling spirit is a tether, a rein connected to a bridle, connecting her head to the ground. You and the woman may even share the same crippling spirit.

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** Is there a crippling spirit in your life that keeps you from imagining a different future? Do you reflexively say, when new possibility presents itself, "I can't, because. . .," and give an excuse that connects you to the prison of the present moment?

II.

*When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.*

Jesus has untied the reins that hold her head down. He has severed the tether. She has always had the ability to stand, but like a donkey, her head has been tied to a hitching post of religious minimalism. Now she stands, sees the sunrise, and praises God spontaneously.

The most powerful gift that Jesus has is to give is a future that we don't believe possible. Resurrection is the ability to see into the distance a future God has left in the sunrise. When Jesus lays hands upon her she rises from the tomb of being a slave to the limitations of a partial freedom assigned by others, and embraces the full freedom of God.

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** What might be the different future for you? For someone you care about?

III.

*But 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."*

Here, I remember how President George Washington refused to give freedom to Oney Judge.<sup>2</sup> She had been the Washington's slave for slightly more than 18 years when she escaped in 1796, leaving the President's House at 6<sup>th</sup> and Market and fleeing by ship to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. She had learned that she was to be given,

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<sup>1</sup> The KJV captures it better: "Woman, thou art **loosed** from thine infirmity."

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/slaves/oney.php>

as a wedding present, to a granddaughter. In Portsmouth, she married and had children. Because the Fugitive Slave Act, which Washington signed into law in 1793, meant that she could be captured, even in a free state, Oney offered to return to the Washington family as a slave if he would declare her children legally free.

Washington declined, saying, "It would neither be *politic or just*<sup>3</sup> to reward unfaithfulness with a premature preference of freedom," which sounds pretty much to me what synagogue leader is saying. They both seem to think it is their role to determine who gets to be free. The good news in Jesus Christ is that, "For freedom, Christ has set us free." To the woman bent and tethered to the ground for 18 years, the dust itself whispers what Paul captures in Galatians, "Therefore, stand and be firm, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."<sup>4</sup>

In 1845, a reporter for an abolitionist newspaper interviewed an elderly Oney in New Hampshire. Now a widow, she was known to her church as a pauper who lived poorly. The reporter asked if she regretted leaving the comforts and privileges of the Washington's home. Her reply is true preaching, a proclaiming of her identity in Jesus Christ:

"No, I am free, and have, I trust, been made a child of God by the means."

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** Who has bridled you? Whom have you tethered unnecessarily? Who can set you free? Whom can you set free?

#### IV.

*"Come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."*

Also, this observation. The leader of the synagogue does not criticize Jesus for freeing the woman, but obliquely condemns the woman for showing up on the sabbath day. Even though she has not asked to be healed, she offends the leader by offering Jesus the opportunity to reveal God's liberty from the very religious-political-social system that has tethered her for so long.

By freeing the woman, Jesus is threatening the synagogue leader's very way of life, so the leader blames the one oppressed by quoting rules and regulations, in the same way that Washington could threaten Oney Judge with the Fugitive Slave Act. This scripture reminds me that the one oppressed is often blamed for their own oppression, including when the one doing the blaming is receiving benefit.

"Power concedes nothing, without a demand," observed Frederick Douglas. The reality of police brutality and deadly violence, the documented abandonment of poorer children in the city's public schools, and the unreal percentage of incarcerated black men are in and of themselves real demands for justice.

It is not enough for any one of us who benefit from power, bequeathed but not earned, manifested as economic and racial privilege, to be of the informed opinion that these demands must be met **tomorrow**, while **today** our leaders subtly blame the affected communities for their own condition and predicament. We must be about cutting the cords of oppression that tether brothers and sisters to a present that destroys their access to a future rarely considered attainable by those who have it already.

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<sup>3</sup> My emphasis. The OED on *politic* in this era: "Of an action or thing: judicious, expedient, sensible; skillfully contrived." So, Washington is saying that giving Oney's children their freedom would be neither the smart nor the right thing to do.

<sup>4</sup> My revision of the ESV translation of Galatians 5:1.

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** Are you able to hear the cries of your brothers and sisters who only seek the same freedom you enjoy, be they the Syrian refugee, the victim of police brutality, the battered spouse, or the hungry school kid who has yet to learn to read?

## V.

*But the Lord answered [the leader of the synagogue] and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey<sup>5</sup> 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?" When 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.*

Jesus call his opponents "hypocrites" because what they will do for their beasts of burden on the sabbath, they will not do for the woman held in bondage by the very rules of the sabbath. Jesus reminds these opponents that the sabbath itself is a day of liberation, not a day of "following the rules," "saying the right thing," or "standing in the right place." The sabbath is the one day of seven that we experience freedom to live entirely within the grace of God. The entire congregation, who are probably just as limited as the woman by their religious leaders, rejoices; they see in Jesus that he is ending their bondage to rule, tradition, and oppression, too

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** Will you seek and serve Christ is all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

## VI.

Jesus is freedom. Jesus is jubilee. Jesus is sight to the blind, clothing to the naked, release to the captive, food for the hungry, and liberation to the oppressed. Jesus gives this woman freedom – Jesus can give each one of us freedom – by restoring the irrevocable promise of God that give us a dignity from which we cannot be separated– not by evil, death, tribulation, oppressive system, or tradition. There is a dignity bequeathed to us by God Almighty, and sometimes what we need is for someone to speak for Christ and say, "Stand up. That dignity is in you, and that dignity shows a future in front of you that you have never asked for because you have never even been able to see it, a future that you can barely imagine for yourself."

**The good news of Jesus Christ asks us to reflect:** Will you claim a different future for yourself not tethered to the expectations of others, but of God?

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<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, my ear pauses on Jesus comparing the woman to an ox or donkey. On the other, I wonder if he is making an observation about the nature of the bridle, bit and reign which are used to control ox and donkey. By untying the reins that hold the woman down, is the scripture suggesting a loosening of the bridle of religious legalism that controls her, so that she might choose to put upon a different yoke, a yoke from which she can learn, in which she can rest? It is a yoke easy, with a burden light. Matthew 11:29-30