

“Quite Unable to Stand Up Straight”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

August 21, 2022

¹⁰Now [Jesus] 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. (Luke 13:10-17)

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all speak of miracles that Jesus performed on the sabbath. As a student of the Bible, that does not surprise me. But I learned two new things about these acts of power this week, two details that I had never noticed or read about before. With regard to the first, I knew that Jesus performed a number of sabbath miracles. What I didn't know is that the number is seven. Some of the healings are mentioned in multiple gospels, others appear in only one, but the New Testament shares exactly seven healings that Jesus accomplished on the seventh day of the week. It is no coincidence that this happened seven times, just like it is no coincidence that the repetition of this sacred number in the Old Testament (*e.g.*, the seven days of creation; the seven years of feast and famine in the dreams of Pharaoh; the seven days of unleavened bread; the covenant forgiveness of debts every seven years; the seven lamps of the tabernacle, etc.) continues to represent completion and Godly perfection in the New Testament (*e.g.*, the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer; the seven "I am" statements of Jesus in the gospel of John; the sending out of the seventy missionaries; the seven utterances of Jesus from the cross; the seven churches of Revelation; etc.). The number seven appears more than 800 times in the Bible, making it by far the most important numerical symbol in all of scripture. So, seven miracles on the seventh day strongly suggests that these acts of Jesus are unusually important -- that their significance somehow reaches all the way down to the earliest foundations of creation.

The second revelation I had this week about these sabbath healing miracles was that, in all seven of them, the person who is healed remains nameless. We could assume that the names must not be that important, perhaps because the people were not that important, but that cannot be right. A better thought may be that, since we are not told their names, they could be anybody. That suffering person could be you, or me, your mother, your daughter, your friend, your enemy. Anybody. Would it be right to assume anything else of the seven healings on the seventh day – a day that is set aside to be particularly hallowed to the Lord?



Hoping you agree that this morning's story may be a particularly important one for all of us, I want to turn to the particular ailment of this particular woman. For eighteen years she had been literally bent over by an unspecified condition. She was hunched over so severely, and so chronically, that she was physically unable to straighten her spine and stand erect.

What do we think that condition was? The text conveys the confounding nature of this ailment by blaming it on "*a spirit*." Obviously, that could mean a lot of things. In fact, when we come across this language, it is tempting to puff ourselves up with our modern sophistication and dismiss this comment as something that a primitive, unschooled, and unscientific culture might say. They couldn't figure out what was wrong with her, so they blamed a spirit. But I think that would be a mistake. They may have blamed a spirit because they didn't know why she was crippled, but the truth is that we don't know either. We can make some educated guesses, because today we know about osteoporosis and autoimmune diseases. We understand how bones can deteriorate or get brittle in old age. But even with all of our modern knowledge, there is still so much we do not know about what causes people to suffer... why a lifelong smoker might die peacefully in his sleep in his nineties, but a young person who never smoked a day in his life finds a cancerous tumor in his lung... why one of the fittest, healthiest people we know can have a heart attack on a run, but others who never exercise never will. To say "a spirit" made the woman cripple is to acknowledge with humility and respect that no one really knew why this poor woman had suffered; they just knew that she had... and that she needed help.

The truth is that we are all bent over and broken in some ways. Some of those broken places are obvious to the world; others are hidden, perhaps even known only to us. But all of us have things that have burdened us for years, tied us up in knots for as long as we can remember, but try as we might, we have just not been able to get free of them. And why are these challenges so problematic for us, when others seem to brush them off with ease? Broken relationships... broken hearts... broken bodies... broken minds. We all know what it is like to feel like we are tied up by cords we cannot break, bent over but quite unable to stand up straight.

As people of faith, we have to say that some of these conditions can be attributed to what we would call "sin." Some painful conditions are given to us by the world with no fault of our own, but others – others we bring on ourselves. This is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he observed in his letter to the Romans that "*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*"¹ Paul saw the effects of human weakness and wandering in his own life, observing that it was a sickness that he could not cure himself no matter how hard he tried. "*I can will what is right,*" Paul said, "*but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*"²

The great Reformer Martin Luther understood exactly what Paul was talking about. Before he became a leader in the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther was just a guy trying as hard as he could to be a good Christian and a good priest. But as much as he strived, as hard as he worked, he never could achieve the kind of righteousness described in the scriptures. Like Paul, he wanted to do the right thing, but he just kept falling short. He would go to confession regularly, but as soon as he left the booth he would think of some

¹ Romans 3:23.

² Romans 7:18-19.

things that he had forgotten to confess. He became obsessed, even paranoid, fearing that if he neglected to root out and confess even the smallest sin or blemish that eternal condemnation would be his fate.³ It was a horrible way to live, because no matter how hard he tried to be good, he realized it would never be enough.

This realization made Luther increasingly anxious, which led him to become increasingly desperate, which led him to become increasingly depressed, which eventually led him to become increasingly angry with God. He got mad at God, because the game seemed to be rigged. God seemed to be demanding a level of righteousness that was impossible to achieve. Luther began to feel like Sisyphus – the King of Corinth who was condemned by the Greek god Zeus to spend eternity in Hades rolling a huge stone up a hill, only to find that every time he got close to achieving the required goal, the stone would become impossibly heavy and roll all the way down to the bottom of the hill. The human struggle for righteousness seemed every bit that hopeless to Luther, and it made him mad at the God who would condemn human beings to such a hopeless endeavor.

In a moment when this anger reached a fever pitch, as he sat alone reading the book of Romans in a cold tower of the Black Cloister in Wittenberg, Luther finally had an epiphany. The clouds of darkness parted and an amazing peace and joy washed over him as he read Paul's words "*I am not ashamed of the gospel. It is the power of God for salvation... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.*" For the first time, Luther understood that peace and righteousness would not come when he finally muscled the stone over the hill with sheer grit and determination. No, scripture was saying that "*The one who is righteous will live **by faith.***" This was "the great discovery" of Luther's life – and one of the key inspirations for the Protestant Reformation – the fact that the healing that leads to righteousness is not something we have to muster or accomplish on our own. It is, rather, something that God gives to us freely and lovingly – something that we cannot give to ourselves, but must receive as a gift. This kind of healing is something that only God can accomplish.

"I felt that I had been born anew," Luther wrote, "and that the gates of heaven had been opened. The whole of Scripture gained a new meaning. And from that point on the phrase 'the [righteousness] of God' no longer filled me with hatred, but rather became unspeakably sweet by virtue of a great love."⁴

The story of Martin Luther's healing follows the same pattern as the story of this unnamed woman who was quite unable to heal herself. When Jesus saw her, called her, and laid his hands upon her, he accomplished for her what she never could have accomplished for herself. "*Woman,*" he said, "*you are set free from your ailment,*" and "*immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.*"

The core message of this story is found in the interplay between two key verbs that are used repeatedly. Those words are δέω (deo) and λύω (luo), to bind and to loose. In fact, in the literal Greek, this story is not about a healing, but about an untying. Jesus does not literally say to this woman, "You are healed." He says, "*You have been loosed... your bindings have been broken... you have been set free from your infirmity.*"⁵ This woman was bent over

³ Ibid., 16-7.

⁴ Ibid. See also Gonzales, 19-20.

⁵ Mark Davis, "Left Behind and Loving It," <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/08/a-bound-woman-bound-to-be-loosed-from.html>, accessed August 19, 2022.

because she was tied up by the brokenness of the world – perhaps by her own mistakes, perhaps by things that were not her fault and had nothing to do with her, perhaps by a little of both. But God broke those bindings, and the result was immediate. The Greek word used to describe her restoration is ἀνορθόω (anorthó), which appropriately brings to mind the English words orthotic and orthopedic. She had been bound, but now she was loosed, and by this miracle her back was free to move, making her quite able to stand up straight.

I think Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he turned to the crowd and tried to explain what had just happened. When some of them tried to shame and trap Jesus for unbinding this woman on the Sabbath, he skewered their bogus accusations with a reference to the basic compassion that we offer to animals. “Consider your ox or your donkey,” Jesus says. “On the sabbath, do you leave your animal tied up all day, or do you untie them and lead them to the trough so they can get a drink of water?” Jesus knew that even the strictest legalist would find that cruel. In the same way, Jesus could not bear to see this woman bound up and in pain. *“Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham [who has been] bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”*

With each passing year that I spend trying to preach these scriptures that have so many layers of meaning and wisdom, the clearer it becomes to me that much of the work of Jesus boils down to this interplay between δέω (deo) and λύω (luo), to bind and to loose. The epic tale of the Exodus, which is THE meta-narrative of the Old Testament, is a story of liberation. It is about God hearing the cries of people in bondage, being moved by love and compassion, and bringing the full power of heaven and earth to bear in order to break their bonds and set them free, so that they can stand up straight in health and wholeness in a place of peace and security.

We do not know why this poor woman was bent over. We just know that she was quite unable to stand up straight. There are things in your life, and in my life, that we are not going to be able to fix ourselves. That does not mean we are not responsible for trying our best to overcome them. What it does mean is that it is not all up to us. It means that, even as we struggle to push our own stones up the hill, we are not pushing alone. It means that God is not cruel enough to make us play a game we cannot win.

“Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” You who are bound will be set free, and you too will be quite able to stand up straight.

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