

Our Gospel reading is not just another miracle story. It's true that the woman experienced a healing that Sabbath in her encounter with Jesus. And, yes, one can take it as a miracle; after all, she was afflicted with a condition, a "spirit of infirmity," that caused her to be bent over for 18 years, according to *Luke*. Yet, there's more to the story.

When we experience the extraordinary, many of us wonder what is happening. Our thoughts can be confusing, jumbled, scattered. "What just happened?" "Was this real?" "Did I truly see/hear/taste/touch this?" Our mind wants some confirmation that what occurred happened, and it absolutely took place. Nowadays, with the advent of Photoshop and other computerized tools to manipulate images, photographic and videographer and otherwise, evidence requires extensive and expensive proof of authenticity.

But, what the people gathered for a Sabbath worship service experienced was not doubted, not denied, not questioned. A "Daughter of Abraham" was cured of her 18-years-long condition that caused her to be bent over unable to stand straight — a mark of dignity today as it was then. Jesus' healing challenged the known means of medicine of the day. His action challenged many other fronts so that we can't stop simply at the woman's cured condition.

There are challenges that spur us to do more, to work at getting better at something. Maybe it's to be a better teacher or health care provider, or a gardener, woodworker, or musician. classes can be taken to improve knowledge or technique. We can learn the hows and whats, the tangible means to improve. Then, there are the challenges that push us to consider, or I might say, reconsider, our attitudes and behavior.

Looking back at *Luke's* telling of Jesus' encounters at that Sabbath service, the challenge was not for the woman. From what was recounted, she was a bystander, a member of the faith community, who was, we can presume, a regular attendee. She didn't approach Jesus as another woman did while He was walking along the road with His disciples and the crowds. As far as we know, she wasn't at the synagogue praying for a miracle. I can only guess that she had come to accept her condition. Imagine her surprise when Jesus called her over and said, "Woman, you are freed of your ailment!" Yet, upon seeing Jesus "heal" the woman, the leaders of the synagogue became indignant; challenging, not Jesus, but the woman, exclaiming, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day!" If we are attentive to sources of conflict, the leader put the woman in a pickle, one might say.

Too often we hear the implication that persons with disabilities, chronic illness, or who are not "perfect," "are not in God's highest favor, have a second-rate life, or are responsible for their own

condition because their faith is too small.”<sup>1</sup> We find it challenging to change our behavior, our attitudes toward those who face daily obstacles in living their full lives. If we are “able-bodied,” we sometimes become complacent and unwilling to help those who are not like us.

I have seen congregations who resisted putting in wheelchair ramps or put them “around back” so that the facade facing the street wouldn’t be marred. A very close colleague of mine worked with members of his Session and with the Trustees for over five years to consider putting in an elevator to provide the older adults and those with mobility challenges access to Sunday School classrooms on the second floor of their building as well as to a fellowship hall in the basement that had gone unused for decades before my colleague became their pastor. I’ve seen sanctuaries where the pews have been modified to allow those people who are in wheelchairs to sit with their families and neighbors and not be brought to the front, placed in a conspicuous position that is awkward for the mobile-challenged, the family, and the rest of the congregation

Jesus challenged those who would limit the woman and all who struggle in life. He points out that the “rules” say that even an ox or a donkey would be untethered (loosed) to get water. Yet, there are those who would hold back (bind) other humans because of...guilt? ...fear? ...power? I’m not sure why exactly. But, Jesus’ charge

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<sup>1</sup> D. Mark Davis, “Bound to Be Loosed from Bondage,” *Political Theology*, Aug. 15, 2022.

against the leaders of the synagogue that day carries into our own time.

Who do we limit? Maybe unintentionally, but still aware, how do we bind the “proverbial hands?” Who do we use as a foil for our lack of or unwillingness to engage in the work of caring for and providing the means to free others? How do we demonstrate God’s grace and love for those who the world looks upon as less than perfect, less than fully human? What is necessary to free others and ourselves to live a full and righteous life?

Another colleague points out:

*The Daughter of Abraham’s passivity indicates that the spirit of infirmity that has bound her has simply become her “normal,” perhaps accepted with the sigh, “It is what it is.” That is the language of “realism” that we use when we talk about fate, destiny, or necessity today. We use accommodating statements like, “Boys will be boys” to accommodate sexual violence; “Nations have always been at war” to accommodate the atrocities of death and destruction; “The poor you have with you always” to accommodate poverty and inequality; or “[Stuff] happens” to accommodate anything else. This is our non-philosophical language of fatalism, a belief that we are bound to be bound, so Christianity becomes the means by which we cope with or excuse such a world.*

*Jesus believes in fate as well, namely, that the one who is bound is bound to be loosed. Rather than accepting her bent posture, or even politely looking the other way, Jesus says to the woman even as she is doubled over, "You are loosed." Then he places his hands on her. Then she stands upright. In that order. Jesus speaks truth to power; he puts his words into action; something liberatively wonderful happens. All of it driven by the presumed answer to Jesus' question, "Was she not bound to be loosed from this binding on the day of the Sabbath?" It is the same philosophical [and theological power behind Jesus' proclamation of the words of 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" (Luke 4:18-19).<sup>2</sup>*

Are we challenged?

Let us pray: Merciful and loving God, we are humbled by the works and words of Your Son, Jesus, who we call the Christ. We are stretched to consider how we bind others that limit who they are, what they can do, how they can live. We are invited to change, to find ways to adjust our minds, our lives to meet the needs of others so that they are able to live fully in Your grace, peace, hope, and love. We pray all this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*