

Now he 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."

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

But 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? 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.

"The Web Itself is a Miracle (version two)"

Jesus is in the synagogue. His disciples are with him and he is teaching the people who are there. I wonder how the leaders in that synagogue felt about having a "guest preacher". Did they invite him to be involved in the service or did he just show up, sermon in hand? Perhaps the crowd spotted him and requested that he speak. My impression is that he wasn't entirely welcomed by the establishment. They were watching and waiting for him to make a mistake. The moment he did something, anything that they could take issue with, they planned to put him in his place. And they did too – "Aha! You've broken one of the laws of Moses." Jesus is not intimidated, but turns on them and calls them hypocrites. He berates them for their lack of empathy and their shallow understanding of God's laws. The crowd cheers the visitor, the leaders hang their heads awaiting another opportunity to find fault with Jesus. This gospel story is one of confrontation. Or is it?

A woman enters the synagogue. She is bent over, crippled and in pain. She has been bent over for eighteen years, forced to look at the ground as she goes through life. She doesn't look at other people, except to take care not to bump into them – to go unnoticed. The gathered community does not see her – she is invisible to them and so is her pain. She is one of those people who would be easy to disregard or someone easy to stare at without consequence. Even worse than being unseen is being observed or watched or analyzed. Imagine the crowd assembled at the synagogue watching as this woman makes her way through the throng – looking at the curvature of her spine without the risk of catching her eye – feeling sorry for her – that poor bent woman.

Jesus is not like other people though. He sees her, sees her pain. He doesn't just watch – doesn't continue with his teaching as if nothing has happened. He really sees her and reaches out to her. Jesus sees her with a gaze that goes directly to the heart. He lays his hands upon her and sets her free. She straightens up. Imagine their eyes meeting, their gaze locked. No longer the bent-over woman but the friend of Jesus – eye to eye, person to person – she sees God right in front of her.

Encountering Jesus the woman is immediately relieved of her affliction and begins to praise God. She doesn't even notice the ensuing conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the synagogue. She is busy thanking God and sharing her good news with others.

This is a gospel story of a miracle. It is the miracle and not the confrontation that catches my attention and imagination. There are plenty of confrontations in our lives today and no where near enough miracles so let's leave the conflict and look to the wonder. How amazing that this woman is healed! How great!

Miracles are defined as wonderful happenings that are contrary to, or independent of, the known laws of nature. They are something marvelous and remarkable. E. B White, children's author of the timeless classic, *Charlotte's Web*, has pearls of wisdom for us about miracles...

In the story Fern rescues a runty pig from being killed at birth. The pig, named Wilbur, grows and makes friends in the barn cellar. When it becomes known that the farmer plans to slaughter Wilbur for pork chops and bacon, one of Wilbur's friends endeavors to keep him alive. This friend, Charlotte, is a large grey spider who also lives in the barn. She writes messages in her web to encourage the belief among people that Wilbur is special. Everyone is convinced that the "signs" in the spider's web are miracles and Wilbur's life is spared. During the story the little girl, Fern, causes her mother concern because she spends so much time with the animals in the barn and insists that she hears them talk. The mother decides to get medical advice on the matter and consults the family doctor. In the course of their conversation Fern's mother asks the doctor if he understands how there could be any writing in a spider's web. He replies: "Oh no, I don't understand it, but for that matter I don't understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle, but nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle."

Luke's gospel tells about an event that is contrary to the known laws of nature – people who are crippled aren't just healed by a word or a touch. That is definitely something marvelous – something that makes us nervous and unsure. But there is more to it than physical healing – more than an unexplainable experience. This is a woman with a spirit that has crippled her for eighteen years. Why is she still coming to the synagogue? No one notices her, she receives no relief. It is a wonder that she continues to attend. She is a remarkable example of perseverance and faith. She is a miracle.

She comes to the synagogue and hears a visitor teaching –recognizes that this is the man people have been talking about – one people say is special – who can do amazing things. Does she fall on him and beg for attention? No! Jesus calls to **her**. Jesus notices **her**. This is contrary to the way we might expect things to be. This is a miracle.

A hunched over woman shuffles into church – she stumbles toward the women's side of the crowd. She knows her place, recognizes her lack of worth. But Jesus rejects the value system that denies her status. He ignores the taboos and calls out to her. He treats the woman with love and dignity. That is a miracle.

A woman is set free from a crippling spirit. She has suffered for eighteen years. She has been hurting and apparently alone in her hurt for what must seem forever. When she is healed does she go to do those things she has been unable to do for years? Does she criticize the people who have ignored her pain? Does she rail against a society that has kept her bent over and alone? No! Amazingly, she praises God and shares the good news. Isn't that contrary to all the laws of human nature that you know? Miraculous!

The woman in this miracle story is identified as crippled – a bent over woman. How would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? She is bent over, has been bent over, staring at the ground, back terribly contorted, for many, many years. She doesn't appear to have a name to anyone in town. When they see her – if they see her – creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, people don't say, "Here comes Mary," or "Look, its Elizabeth." They say, "Here comes the crippled woman."

It is her name and it is her life, her destiny, her whole sad fate. The woman doesn't have a name, other than the one based upon her disability. She doesn't have an identity other than that of a victim. She doesn't have a family, it seems, no occupation, nothing other than her deformity. She is the one who is bent, stooped, bearing upon her shoulders an invisible yet heavy burden, the burden of being different, the burden of not looking like everyone else, the burden of not being able to do what everyone else does. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman.

This woman is a reminder to us for everyone who is labeled in some way. She is "just a drunk," "retarded," "slow," "scrawny," "homeless," "a druggie," "grossly overweight," "blind as a bat," "a gimp" ...until she is encountered by Jesus – really seen. Jesus heals her, and it is a wonder. For the first time she is able to stand straight, to look ahead, to be restored to what we call normalcy. But perhaps just as astonishing is the way Jesus speaks to her, what Jesus says about her. He does not call her disabled, or hindered, or a victim of life's unfairness.

Jesus calls her "a daughter of Abraham." She is an heir to the blessings of God. As a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labeling. She is part of God's great salvation of the whole world.

She stands up straight. Her life has been caught up in God's promises to the world. Her life has been renamed, not as long story of injustice, victimization, and sadness, but as part of the great drama of God's redemption. What a miracle this is!

Jesus names us too. We are not limited by the names the world wants to lay upon us. We are daughters and sons of Abraham. Our life is meant to count for something. We have been given the name "Christian" – a determinative, revealing name that promises a life of growing into God's gracious dreams for us.

Look to the miracles around you and those that you are privileged to participate in: tireless efforts of those who fight poverty – a song that lifts and soothes the soul – hope that remains among those who suffer through war and violence – youth discovering their faith – a married couple's love still vibrant after decades of wear.

In Christ we are invited to live among the miracles of creation and in him we find the power and the courage to really see those around us. The world walks in front of each day – on the streets, in the newspaper, on radio and TV. Will we stop and see the pain? Will we allow the gaze of the troubled world in which we live to catch our own in such a way that we might all be transformed? Healing is unleashed in the world when we dare to look into one another's eyes and be remade in the image of Christ. This is where the miracles are – in the web of creation – in each one of us... **Amen.**

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