

## **SET FREE**

Luke 13:10-17

Kelly Boyte Brill  
Avon Lake UCC  
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If you've ever been backpacking, if you've ever felt your shoulders ache from the weight of the pack, then you also know the sweet relief that comes at the end of the hike when you back up to a picnic table or the base of a tree, lower your pack down, and allow your arms to slip out of those straps. You've been set free.

Or maybe you remember traveling in the days before the miraculous invention of wheeled luggage, hauling heavy suitcases until your arms begged you to set them down.

Just carrying groceries in from the car, heroically six bags in each arm...it's painful.

Or some of you may know the experience of holding a toddler on one hip while cooking dinner - one arm around the child, the other arm chopping and stirring. After a while you just have to set the child down and free your arm from that weight.

And then of course there are the other heavy things that we carry. There is the weight of grief, the burden of shame, or guilt, or regret. Lugging them around can dampen our moments of joy, or cause them to be less frequent. We long to be set free.

There are times, backpacking, when all you can think of is the weight on your back. You don't notice the beauty of the woods around you, the smell of the pine, the sound of the nearby waterfall. Just the weight on your back. All weights are like that sometimes, shutting out the life around us.

We don't know exactly what it was that caused the woman to be bent over for 18 years. I know I've heard people tell me that they're bent over with grief. I've had people

say, “Why have I been given so many more burdens to carry than everyone else?” And it’s true, isn’t it, that some people seem to get way more than their share? They’re like the little child whose backpack is as heavy as she is, who looks as though she’ll just topple over from carrying all that weight.

We don’t know exactly what it was that caused the woman to be bent over. We’re not told what it is. What do you think? What are all the reasons that someone has of feeling trapped in their own skin? Unable to stand up straight and look people in the eye? It could be guilt. It could be shame. Maybe she’s embarrassed because of something in her past, or something she perceives to be a disability. We don’t know.

What we do know is that Jesus sees it. He sees all of her. He sees her past, her present, and her potential. And this one, whose desire is for all of us to know abundant life, life in the fullest, this one who sees us as we are and as we could be...this Jesus touches her and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” The healing is immediate. She is made whole and well, and she praises God, giving thanks for her new life.

End of story? Happy ending? Not quite. You see, it’s the Sabbath. And Jesus is in the synagogue, surrounded by faithful people who know the law, some of whom are sticklers for obeying the law to the letter. And to them, that’s all that matters. One leader of the synagogue is indignant, and tattles to everyone there, “Jesus has healed someone on the Sabbath, the day set aside for rest and worship.”

Can you imagine such shortsightedness, such myopia, such narrow vision that would cause someone to feel indignant rather than joyous that a woman, weighted down for 18 years, has been set free?

There's also an irony to the synagogue leader's complaint. Why was the Sabbath commanded in the first place? Here's what the book of Deuteronomy says: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." The Sabbath was a celebration of the liberation of the people of Israel. A time to remember, celebrate, and thank God for their freedom. And here is Jesus setting a woman free, a perfectly appropriate act for the Sabbath, really the most apt way to keep the Sabbath, and the synagogue leader can't see it. The Sabbath was meant to be a gift, a time of rest and restoration, a time to worship God. But quickly that gift turned into Law, and all sorts of rules grew up about what was work and what wasn't, what it was permissible to do on the Sabbath and what was not.

Do you think it's possible that the leader of the synagogue needs to be set free just as much as the bent-over woman? Is he just as crippled, just as blind, just as unable to see the world and all its beauty? Is he too in some sort of prison that keeps him from the abundant life – the life of wellness and wholeness which God wants for all of us?

It's a different kind of burden to carry, the one that worries about rules, the one that tries to catch people making mistakes. It's a very heavy weight to shoulder, when you feel that you always have to be right.

Is there something for which you long to be set free? Some habit that eats away at you, some nagging resentment you're carrying around? A refusal to forgive? A prejudice?

This woman's story is a story about how life can beat you down. And with each blow, you are less free. Less able to move in the world as a free agent, even though, as scriptures tell us, "Christ has set us free to live in freedom." We are meant for freedom.

We are meant to stand up straight, not be bent over with worries, bent over with grief, bent over with guilt.

What Jesus does for the woman is set her free from the torture and imprisonment of her own body. Jesus gives her a new life, free from pain, free from shame, free from isolation. Jesus restores to the woman her dignity, her sense of self-worth, her place in the community, and her very identity. No longer simply a cripple, she is, as Jesus calls her, a proud daughter of Abraham, heir of God's promise, and participant in God's covenant. Jesus reaches out to this outcast, this woman whose everyday life is worse than death, touches her, and gives her the wholeness, health, and peace that God always intended people to have. And she didn't have to do anything. What Jesus does for the woman is a gift; it is pure grace.

When Jesus touches the woman, she stands up straight and tall for the first time in 18 years, and she begins to praise God. She knows the source of her healing. So on the Sabbath she praises God for this unexpected, wonderful, unbelievable gift of life.

That same gift of healing is offered to every one of us.

I want to share with you a poem from the contemporary poet, Mary Oliver. It's entitled, "Heavy."

**Heavy, Mary Oliver**

That time  
I thought I could not  
go any closer to grief  
without dying

I went closer,  
and I did not die.  
Surely God  
had His hand in this,

as well as friends.  
Still, I was bent,  
and my laughter,  
as the poets said,

was nowhere to be found.  
Then said my friend Daniel  
(brave even among lions),  
“It’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it—  
books, bricks, grief—  
it’s all in the way  
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,  
put it down.”  
So I went practicing.  
Have you noticed?

Have you heard  
the laughter  
that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger  
to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world  
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled—  
roses in the wind,  
the sea geese on the steep waves,  
a love  
to which there is no reply?

We are meant to live in freedom, to be rid of the burdens that cause us to bend over  
with shame and grief. We are meant for joyful, abundant life. Thanks be to God.

Reference: Sermon by Ruth Hamilton