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Spirits

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Rick had a spirit that didn't cripple his back, but it was crippling his soul and his mind and his heart. Day after day he felt the weight and burden of it, the guilt and anxiety and exhaustion of it. As he drove to work every day - the very work that provided the income he needed to make a living and whose unethical business practices were undoubtedly the cause of the crippling spirit that weighed down his conscience- he drove past a small lanon stone church building. The sign out front identified it as an Episcopal Church and gave the worship times.

Even though he wasn't a church go-er, One Sunday morning Rick woke up early and decided to go to the little church's 8:00 worship service. There wasn't a big crowd, and the youngest person there was the priest. Rick had never been in an Episcopal service before, but that didn't stop him from participating. He listened to the lessons and Gospel and sermon. He received and passed the peace. He received the Body and Blood of Christ. He prayed. And when he left, he felt lighter than he had in years. Rick felt he had finally found something that could help him deal with that crippling spirit, as he'd encountered and received a different kind of spirit.

After attending many more Sundays and participating in small groups at that little Episcopal Church Rick eventually discovered he was completely free from the crippling spirit that had previously weighed him down. First he started to feel better, then he realized that he didn't have to leave his job, he could identify what aspects of his job felt so oppressive to him, and decide how he was going to deal with or handle them. His big discovery was that he could still do his job and do it well without having to hold to some of the values his employer had that Rick believed were unethical.

Once Rick was free from that very real and harmful spirit, he began to live with more joy than he had before, laughed more, gave more, had richer relationships, and started to participate in the life of the church, the very place where he had discovered and received a holy spirit that had liberated him from the type of spirit that been holding him back from being all that God wanted and dreamed for him.

Eventually, Rick told the young priest about his experience, and she never forgot it, as it taught her that a church, no matter its size, can be a way for people weighed down by those unhealthy spirits of guilt, shame, fear, unworthiness, self-pity, self-righteousness, anger, resentment, or any of those spirits that try to hold us back and prevent us from living into what God intends, to discover and receive the liberating Holy Spirit, the very thing Jesus came to bring, as we saw in today's Gospel.

Rick and the crippled woman have a lot in common, even though they are separated by many generations. Both were weighed down with a spirit that only Jesus was able to liberate them from. It can be easy to mistake this story, which is found only in Luke's Gospel as a healing story, but if we look carefully at the words, it seems the author of Luke took great care to describe this woman's condition as not just physical, but spiritual. The author says the woman had a *spirit* that crippled her, a spirit Jesus attributed to the accuser, the satan, who bound her to a suffering Jesus freed or liberated her from. To Luke, this is a liberation story.

Sometimes language like this is seen as being unscientific and might be attributed to the writer being unaware or unknowledgeable of what really causes ailments. Maybe that is true. But modern scientists, both physicians and psychologists are discovering or maybe re-discovering that sometimes physical ailments can be caused by things like stress, unresolved grief, guilt, shame, anger and anxiety. A recent article published in a parenting magazine talked about this very thing, and advised parents if their child suffers from chronic pain like headaches or stomach aches and doctors can find no physical cause for that pain, the reason for their suffering may be due to stress or anxiety. The article reported there is a rise in the number of children ages 6 to 19 suffering from stress induced physical ailments and advised parents to be aware of this.

It seems Rick and the woman in today's Gospel aren't the only ones to find themselves under the weight of unhealthy spirits, and the medical community isn't afraid to acknowledge that our physical well-being may indeed be affected by the spiritual, mental, social, and emotional aspects of our being.

Today's Gospel seems to support the idea that whatever caused the woman to be bent over so dramatically wasn't only physical, it was a spirit, an outside influence that had harmed her. Notice the author used the word bound: the spirit bound her to her condition. That term can mean tied to, obligated, owned by. Like slaves were bound to their owners, or in a more positive light the

way married couples are bound to each other. The spirit that bound this woman was not positive, it was from, in Jesus' words, Satan, or the accuser, the one who is trying to prevent people from living the way God intended. This concept that there is a Satan trying to prevent people from living the way God intends appears in other places in Luke's Gospel, such as when Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days and was tempted by Satan, who tried to tempt Jesus to live not just for himself but contrary to God's purpose. In chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel we heard Jesus himself say his purpose is to restore sight to the blind, to proclaim good news to the poor, and to set the captives free, to show people God loves them. Today's Gospel story is an example of when Jesus set a woman free from something that held her down and held her back. We don't know what that something was: abuse, ridicule, back braking work, a form of oppression, and perhaps it doesn't really matter what her specific problem was, that is why the author of Luke referred to it as a spirit. It was something that was not of God, it was something that held her back from living the way God intends every person to live.

What is important is what happened when Jesus saw the woman and what happened when Rick came to church. Jesus showed that we human beings do not have to be held captive to debilitating or oppressive spirits, whatever those spirits might be for us. Jesus came to set us free from that oppression, because oppression like that is not from God.

The young priest learned from Rick's experience that Jesus is still freeing people from whatever might be holding them down or back from receiving God's love and sharing that love of God with the world. One way that happens is through the spirit people who visit our, or any parish encounter. As a parish family we have the very real opportunity to make that liberating spirit of Jesus visible and accessible in our worship, our formation, our programs, our presence. First, we need to remember that truth ourselves whenever we encounter those disheartening, disturbing, discouraging spirits that make us feel weighed down or alienated from God that they are not from God, and we don't have to let them have power over us. Often that is the most effective way we can live into that liberation Jesus offers. We can remember there are ways for us to work with systems that allow us to reflect God's love, even if those systems don't share the same intention.

We can remember and believe that God has something better for us and for every child of God no matter a person's age or gender or race or nationality or place in the economy or society. God has a vision for humanity where no one is afraid, no one is starving, no one is put down or humiliated or dehumanized, where there is enough and there is respect and hope and all of us can have a real and loving relationship with God. This vision of God can be our vision here at Good Shepherd; we can embrace this spirit of liberation, and set it loose to help us all live into this wonderful life-giving vision of God.

I don't remember if it was Augustine of Hippo or Desmond Tutu or both who said, "By himself God won't, by ourselves we can't, together with God we can." God's vision is possible, and it isn't just a pie in the sky ideal for us to critique from a far, it is, as Rick discovered and a young priest learned, work God is inviting us to share with God by offering us the freedom from whatever could cripple us and hold us back to love and serve God who loves us. So that God's vision can grow and become a reality one person at a time.