

Proper 16 C
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Liberation from Certain Spirits
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

She was her parent's 20th child; born pre-maturely on June 23, 1940 weighing only 4.5 pounds and was what many called a sickly child; suffering from illnesses like pneumonia and scarlet fever before the age of 4. To make matters worse, her family lived in a part of the United States where segregation was the law, and they had to drive 50 miles to get to a hospital that would treat this little girl simply because of the color of her skin. Despite these challenges, she recovered from those diseases. However, when she contracted polio around the age of 6, it affected her ability to use her left leg. Doctors did all they could but claimed she would never be able to walk or run normally.

But that little girl's family refused to believe that. After all, there was a total 22 of children, two parents and a grandparent who were willing to do what they could for that little girl who was more than a body: she was also a soul, a mind, and a spirit. And all of those were strong. Her family members shared the responsibility of massaging her left leg and helped exercise it. They prayed for her and told her what they believed: that she could walk again.

And that little girl didn't just walk again. No. She ran. She ran all the way to the 1956 Olympic Summer Games where she participated in Track and Field and brought home a bronze medal. In 1960 she returned to the Olympic Summer Games where she became the first woman to earn 3 Gold Medals. Perhaps some of you have heard of or remember Wilma Rudolf, the extraordinary woman who said of her accomplishments no one achieves success on their own, but with the help and support of others. At the peak of her athletic career, Wilma Rudolf believed that God didn't want her to use her abilities selfishly, so she retired from competition, went to college, and after graduation became a coach in order to help others achieve their dreams all while working as a civil rights activist.

It might seem Wilma's story is one of physical healing: a small child told she'll never walk again goes on to become a history making Olympic Gold medalist and civil rights activist looks at first blush like someone who was healed of a physical ailment like the woman in today's Gospel. But such an interpretation misses the point of Wilma's life, her spirit, and that of the Gospel. Today's Gospel is about a healing, but it is a certain kind of healing. It is the liberation from a certain kind of spirit.

If you look closely at the beginning of today's Gospel, the author introduces us to a woman who was bent over, not from a diagnosed medical condition, but from a spirit. One that had been crippling her for 18 years. These are important details to pay attention to. Because they point us to what Jesus is up to in today's Gospel. This doesn't mean the woman's suffering was all "in her head". Nor does it mean the author of the Gospel or people of the times were uneducated and out of superstitious belief labeled everything they didn't understand as something demonic. Crippling spirits are very real and very present even in our modern times. Only we call them by names like oppression, abuse, insecurity, imposter syndrome, misogyny, homophobia, isolation, racism, white supremacy, arrogance, ignorance, there are others I could name, but I am sure this is enough to give you an idea of the spirits or mindsets that prevent us from loving God and our neighbors and sometimes even loving ourselves in a healthy way.

There are some who wonder if this woman was bent over not only or because of a physical back problem, but because of other contributing factors. Perhaps she was a laborer who had spent most of her days bent over the ground tending crops or over tables preparing food for so long she couldn't stand up straight anymore. This can and does happen today. Others wonder if she suffered abuse, and her fears and anxieties were burdens she carried that eventually manifested themselves physically in her body. There have been scientific studies that prove such things do happen, and medications and surgeries are not enough to restore health in those situations. Healing in those types situations requires therapy and liberation from whatever is causing the fear and anxiety.

We aren't told the details in today's Gospel, only that this woman had suffered from this crippling spirit for 18 years. The Old Testament scholars among us might recognize that time period as significant. Eighteen years was mentioned in the Old Testament before as time periods when God's People were under the rule of people like the Philistines whom they considered oppressive. This might give us a clue that today's Gospel isn't just about healing. It is about liberation from oppression.

One could argue one of the things that made Wilma Rudolf's life so remarkable was how her family refused to let her diagnosis oppress them into believing she'd never walk again. Her family didn't let that diagnosis cripple their spirit or hers, because they believed in something higher.

The woman in today's Gospel, it seems, was not so fortunate. Until Jesus saw her and called her over to him, proclaimed her free, then touched her. And she rose up into a position of praise. In that moment, she used her new-found freedom to praise God. That is all very important. Because those are all things that describe liberation. This woman is freed from a spirit that had literally held her down, and she

used that freedom to praise to God. It showed who she was: a child of God, one of God's people, a Daughter of Abraham, as Jesus named her in response to the leader of the synagogue's criticism of healing on the sabbath.

I believe it is important not to write off the synagogue leader as just mean or against Jesus. In his way he may have been trying to educate and remind people of their identity and the rules that set them apart as God's People at a time when Rome – an oppressive government- ruled over them. He also might have been jealous or afraid of Jesus' ability to do what he could not. His fear and jealousy might have been his own crippling spirit and gotten in the way of seeing what Jesus was doing. Jesus wasn't breaking the sabbath law; he was fulfilling it.

Remember the concept of sabbath comes from those 10 Commandments God gave Moses not long after God's People were liberated from their oppression as slaves in Egypt. The purpose or intention of the sabbath wasn't just to take a break or rest from work. Sabbath has a much more holy intention. The purpose of sabbath is to practice the reminder that human life is not defined by our productivity but by God's will and God's purpose. That is why worship is part of the sabbath even today. Since sabbath is linked to the liberation of the Hebrew people from Pharaoh, many scholars tell us Jesus liberating the woman from her ailment was not only an appropriate act to do on the sabbath, it is a fulfillment of sabbath and is an inbreaking of God's Kingdom, where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Which means we who follow Jesus today can have a deeper understanding of what it means to live our faith in the world. It means that we, like Jeremiah in the first reading we heard, have been empowered to proclaim not just that Jesus loves people, but to proclaim liberation from those crippling spirits that are in the world today.

I can remember several times I simply told a person they didn't have to let anyone continue to abuse them or hurt them, that such behavior is not love or at least it is not the love of God, it is one of those crippling spirits – anything that prevents a person from living into the full freedom God dreams for all people. After hearing that good news, their faces lifted up, their eyes were filled with light and they even stood a little taller, like the woman in today's Gospel. I can remember times someone told me I didn't have to be defined by another person's belief that I was not strong enough or good enough or smart enough to accomplish or achieve something. It was joyfully liberating; setting me free from what might have held me back to live into the life God was calling me to. Of course, such liberation often has a cost, usually it upsets the person who benefited in some way from the oppression. But that doesn't diminish the reality that such moments are inbreaking Kingdom of God moments.

Maybe there is a better way to show how Jesus' fulfillment of the sabbath has opened the way for the Kingdom of God to liberate us all from the crippling spirits that prevent us from lifting our faces and voices in praise and thanksgiving to God. It's a true story about two friends and the liberating moment they met.

Their names are Amina Amdeem and Joseph Weidknecht and they were both attending the University of Texas when they met. Amina was walking to class when she saw Joseph surrounded by several other students. It appeared they were fighting; the students around him voiced vulgar offense at the hat Joseph was wearing: a bright red hat with the words "Make America Great Again" embroidered on it. One person snatched the hat from Joseph's head.

That is the moment Amina snapped. You see, Amina is a Muslim woman who wears a hijab and has had people try and rip her hijab off her head and seeing the same thing happen to another person didn't just make her mad, it infuriated her. She ran to the group and began screaming at them to give the hat back. Which they wisely did.

That is how Joseph and Amina met. They began talking and learned a lot about each other. Joseph admitted he had never met a Muslim before, and had only seen what the media presents. Amina agreed the media doesn't usually show what she described as "normal Muslims who listen to classic rock" like she does. She told Joseph how she was born in Iraq but moved to America with her family when she was 10, which was hard because she was the only Muslim in her town and her school. It was especially hard when she went to middle school, as that is when other children aren't as welcoming of those who are perceived as different. Joseph shared with Amina his painful childhood. He was homeschooled after only 1 year in public school because in that year he had gotten into three fights. Being homeschooled was a lonely way to grow up, he didn't have many friends. And after the last presidential election, he lost most of his friends because of how he voted. These two friends are so very different and at the very same time, they have so much in common.

You can see their story for yourself by visiting Story Corps – a nonprofit group that shares and preserves people's stories in order to build connections - on social media, on their website, podcast or YouTube channel. Just search for a story called "The Golden Rule." It's a good story; a liberating story in so many ways. It is a friendship that liberates both Amina and Joseph from loneliness, it is a friendship that breaks down negative dehumanizing stereotypes to reveal the very human commonalities we all share, and it is a gorgeous inbreaking of the Kingdom of God. Amina and Joseph said they wanted to share the story of their friendship because they hope it will lead to more vulnerable conversations before someone decides to end a friendship or isolate themselves from others. Their story gives me hope. Which is why

I believe, like Wilma Rudolf's family, no matter what bad news we are told, we don't have to let crippling spirits keep us down. Jesus is calling us to stand up, to praise God, and share the message of freedom with those who can be dispirited and need to hear of the liberating dream that God has for the world. And whenever we might feel discouraged, or when those crippling spirits start to oppress us, to remember that we have don't have to listen to them. We can listen to Jesus who is the voice of liberating resurrection life for us all.