

To receive the ten commandments, the law, God instructs the people to do two things in preparation: wash their clothes and stay away from Mt Sinai. Moses adds a third requirement: the men, to be holy, are to stay away from the women.

Judith Plaskow, known for being the first Jewish feminist theologian, says Jewish law classified women as peripheral Jews, who are relatively absent, not only at Sinai, but from the central activities that define Jewish life. The women enabled the men to do what matters and to be who counts.

*Now (as was his custom) Jesus 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 quite unable to stand up.*

We do not know the age of this woman. We do not know if she is married, divorced, a widow. We do not know if she had children, siblings or any family to care for her. We do not know her name. She has no identity other than that of “the bent over woman.”

The spirit that cripples her is not demon possession; Jesus does not perform an exorcism. The spirit that cripples her is not a physical illness like curvature of the spine; Jesus does not perform a healing. The leader of the synagogue calls it a healing so he can accuse Jesus of breaking the law.

Listen again to what Jesus says after calling the woman to come to him, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” She is woman, not an individual woman but a representative figure of all women. What ails all women? Why do women need to set free?

Centuries of exclusion from full participation in the social and spiritual life of her community crippled her spirit and diminished the life of her community. The weight of invisibility accumulates day after day, year after year, century after century, until it appears to have divine sanction.

The way Luke tells the story is fascinating, especially read in light of Plaskow’s assertion about the invisibility of women. “Just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.” She appeared, “just then,” just when Jesus was present. She appeared as if out of nowhere, as if she did not exist before Jesus *saw* her.

Oliver Sacks, a neurologist (d. 2015), helps us understand what happens when Jesus sees this woman made invisible by her religious and cultural traditions. “Feeling the full presence of the world,” he writes, “depends on feeling the full presence of another person, as a person.”

“Reality is given to us by the reality of people; our sense of reality, of trust or security, is critically dependent on a human relation. A single good relation is a lifeline; we are physicians to each other.”

In seeing her, Jesus sets her free. She is recognized, acknowledged, known. Immediately, she rises up and praises God. The ruler of the synagogue is not pleased. He expresses his anger at Jesus indirectly by addressing the crowd. His question is an attack on Jesus for doing work on the Sabbath, thus breaking one of the commandments.

The fact that a woman is seen and heard in the synagogue is as much a trigger for the ruler’s anger as is Jesus’ willingness to work on the Sabbath. *Women*, as we read in 1 Corinthians 14:34f, *should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate as the law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home.*

This is one more instance of Jesus’ message of liberation being too radical for his followers, of the cultural norms binding what Jesus set free.

Jesus addresses the ruler directly. The plural “hypocrites” indicts all of the ruler’s colleagues in this conflict. If the law permitted the loosing of a bound animal for a drink on the Sabbath, why shouldn’t a freeborn daughter of Abraham, bound by crippling cultural and religious traditions, be set free on the Sabbath? Did the leader of the synagogue really mean to privilege his donkey over women?

Jesus calls the woman a daughter of Abraham. She is **a daughter of the promise that precedes the law**, a freeborn child of God. In light of Jesus’ vision of her, she is able to rise up (resurrection), casting off the weight of invisibility, and look the men in straight in the eye.

Jesus was an itinerant preacher and teacher, repeating his message as he traveled from synagogue to synagogue. I imagine he was reminding the worshippers that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, *to let the oppressed go free.*

The Spirit of the Lord has not truck with crippling spirits, of which there are many. Patriarchy attempts to render women invisible. Nationalism attempts to render the foreigner invisible. Racism attempts to render the other invisible. Fascism attempts to render the powerless invisible. And fundamentalism binds everyone within its reach.

Any ideology, religious or cultural, that cripples the human spirit, does not enjoy divine sanction. Whatever cripples us, is not of God. We are children of Abraham, children of the promise which precedes the law. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, stand upright, then, and praise God not only in word but in deed.