

Jesus and women: 'You are set free'

By Elizabeth Johnson (Abridged)

<http://globalsistersreport.org/column/speaking-god/spirituality/jesus-and-women-you-are-set-free-1186>

There is a powerful scene in the Gospels that shows in a flash how life-giving the encounter between Jesus and women can be. As Luke tells the story:

Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath, and a woman came in who had been crippled by a spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her,

"Woman, you are set free from your infirmity."

Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began to praise God. (Lk 13:10-13)



Notice the setting: a holy place where the community gathers on the Sabbath day. Notice, too, the position of Jesus: front and centre, the famous teacher instructing the group. It is a solemn moment. The woman slips in quietly. She is nobody important. For almost two decades she has moved through the world stooped over, crippled by a terrible handicap, a pitiful figure in the eyes of her neighbours. Unless she makes a great effort, all she sees as she moves through her life is the ground or the floor. Now she just wants to listen and pray.

But Jesus notices. He could have gone on with his teaching, but, as we are told in other stories, a feeling of compassion wells up in his heart. He stops mid-stream, turning full attention her way. In front of the whole assembly he calls her forth, reaches out, and his powerful words and healing touch bring strength to her twisted spine. *"Woman, you are set free!"*

Imagine how it felt to stand up straight, to lift up her head, to look around and see faces instead of the ground. A new way of life opens before her. And this woman knew whom to thank. She praises God for showing her such tender mercy through the kindness of this prophet and teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

Christian women today read this story as a revelation of what their relationship with Jesus can bring about. Bent over by many forces, they find his powerful compassion a spur to liberation, enabling them to stand up straight. Women scholars are discovering that there are many scenes like this in the New Testament that show Jesus' love for women, his concern for their well-being, and his freeing effect on their lives. But over the centuries the power of these stories has often been ignored because the men who preach and teach usually do not appreciate the suffering that women bear.

Burdens

Society: Consider these U.N. statistics: women, who form half of the world's population, work three-fourths of the world's working hours; receive one-tenth of the world's salary; own one percent of the world's land; form two-thirds of illiterate adults; and together with their dependent children form three-fourths of the world's starving people.

To make a bleak picture worse, women are subject to domestic violence at home and are raped, prostituted, trafficked into sexual slavery and murdered by men to a degree that is not reciprocal. Regarding education, employment and other social goods, men have advantages simply by being born male. Racial and ethnic prejudices add further disadvantage to women, as does class privilege that disrespects women who are poor. Every culture has different dynamics. But it is always women who are regarded as of least value.

In 1995 the United Nations held a conference on women in Beijing, China. An historic event, it was the first gathering attended by women from every nation in the world. On that occasion Pope John Paul II wrote a *Letter to Women* strongly supporting the conference's agenda of social equality:

"As far as personal rights are concerned, there is an urgent need to achieve real equality in every area: equal pay for equal work, protection for working mothers, fairness in career advancement, equality of spouses with respect to family rights and the recognition of everything that is part of the rights and duties of citizens in a democratic state. This is matter of justice, but also of necessity."

REFLECTIONS ON THE JOURNEY

A Pilgrim's Prayer

Father, I have come to experience your love in many ways, as life's Pilgrim.

I thank you for the spirit you breathed into me - a wandering spirit -
For eyes that guide me, feet which plod the paths.
Occasional signposts when I have lost the way.
But most of all I thank you for your love,
which has given my journey meaning and direction.
You have blessed me with divine restlessness,
prodded me from my complacency,
Urged me down roads
I would not feel strong
enough to travel;
supported me with fellow - travellers
who bolstered me when I despaired,
refreshed and renewed me,
when I thought my last step
was just that.

How am I to show my thanks
for eyes and limbs,
For companionship
on an otherwise
lonely journey.

Never let me forget I am a Pilgrim
on the way home.

Teach me to seek you, meet you and
know you as I travel the way.
Especially I pray that you give me
faithful companions
who will let me rest -
but never stop.

who will challenge me in my comfortableness,
strengthen me in my weakness,
support me in the sufferings all journeys
involve,

And share with me the joys of travelling,
Seeking and finding our way home together.
Through Christ your Son and my Brother,
the Pilgrim and the Way, now and forever.
Amen.

