

Off the record: Luke 13:10-17

by [Teresa Berger](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

In a story that is unique to Luke, Jesus heals a nameless woman by giving her the freedom to unbend and stand up straight after she has lived for years in crippling bondage. The woman has not asked to be healed. She simply finds herself in Jesus' presence—and that leads to healing and life for her. This beautiful story, however, is not without conflict. Jesus heals the woman in sacred space (a synagogue, mentioned twice) and within sacred time, namely on a Sabbath (noted no fewer than five times), and he is criticized for this breach of the law. Jesus insists that the synagogue and the Sabbath are not the only things that are holy—so is this woman's life. She is a daughter of the promise—"And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29), or a "daughter of Abraham," as Jesus names her.

He turns to his critics and says, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

Women have little difficulty identifying with this daughter of the promise. As Miriam Therese Winter writes:

Surely
You meant
when You lifted
her up
Long ago
To your praise,
Compassionate One,
not one woman
only
but all women
bent

by unbending ways.

This truth is important today, when global forces are constraining women's lives as never before. Amnesty International put it succinctly when it launched a 2004 global campaign to stop violence against women: "From the battlefield to the bedroom, women are at risk." Statistics confirm that statement. Although the world's population continues to grow, the number of women is declining. Already there are 60 to 100 million fewer girls than boys in the world, due to selective abortions, selective infanticide or neglect, and the uneven allocation of basic resources such as food, health care and education to girls. The battering of women results in more injuries requiring medical attention than auto accidents, muggings and rapes combined.

And then there are the cultural forces that "bend" women's bodies through cosmetic surgery, clothing or obsessive forms of dieting. Cosmetic surgery now includes interventions such as facelift, eyelid surgery, laser skin resurfacing, cheek augmentation, body contouring, and breast augmentation, reduction or lift. I have this list in my hand because every employee in my workplace received an ad for these services, as well as a special offer of a free consultation and discount. (The woman in the ad, by the way, is young, blonde, innocent-looking, and wearing very little.)

Forces that bend and cripple women's lives—yes, we know them today. They are all around us. Jesus' healing of a woman's constrained and bent-over body, in a context such as ours, surely qualifies as good news. But as it is so often when we look closer, the good news ends up being more complex and ambiguous than we might wish. The woman healed and freed for praise of the Compassionate One, after all, joins a number of women whose voices we never hear. Sadly, one of the sites of this silencing is a sanctuary. Although Jesus heals this daughter of the promise in a synagogue, and although she is said to respond with praise, her voice is lost in the recorded testimony. Like the old prophet Anna in the temple (Luke 2:38), "certain women" who gathered in prayer before Pentecost (Acts 1:14), or the four daughters of Philip who have the gift of prophecy (Acts 21:9), the woman of Luke 13 is not heard.

This is not unique to Luke. Fewer than a dozen of the nearly 300 recorded prayers in the First Testament (Old Testament) purport to be women's prayers. The asymmetry is striking. Nothing would lead us to believe that women invoked the Holy One with

any less frequency or fervor than did their male counterparts, yet the scriptures record only a fraction of women's prayers in comparison with those prayed by men. Luke's story of the crippled woman is a part of this larger history. Of the women's prayers that are recorded, most are related to women's reproductive and maternal roles. In the New Testament, we find traces of such maternal concerns in the voices of the two pregnant women, Elizabeth and Mary, whose stories shape the beginning of Luke's Gospel. Other women described as praying and praising God simply remain speechless in the recorded testimony, among them the bent-over woman healed by Jesus. The Gospel writer tells us only that she "stood up straight and began praising God."

The uneven witness of the scriptures to women is part of our tradition and heritage. We simply have to acknowledge that (even) the most foundational texts of our faith leave much of women's practices of faith invisible. How crucial, then, for women today to stand up and speak. In a world that continues to "bend" women's lives, we must follow Jesus in claiming that the lives of women are sacred, and that women are invited to be healed and flourish in the presence of the Holy One. Would that Jesus' generous gift of freedom for a bent-over woman were visible in our time, and especially in our sanctuaries. And that women's voices of praise, born from God-given freedom, be heard around the world. Surely that would be good news for today.