

An overly personal reading

By [L. Roger Owens](#)

August 20, 2013

*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Owens's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

When I read this passage from Luke I immediately remembered an exegesis paper I once wrote after reading an article by a doctor about what disease the woman might have. He concluded that she has a certain kind of arthritis—the same kind I had been recently diagnosed with. This gave me a sense of immediate connection with the woman in the story.

Such personal identification is homiletically useful. When preparing a sermon, I often spend time in *lectio divina* on the text I'm going to preach, in order to listen to the text prayerfully and discover where it speaks to me. The discovery that I'm allowed to do this—indeed, that I should do it—was very liberating for my sermon preparation, though it ran counter to what I'd been taught in seminary.

But rereading this story also reminded me of the danger of clinging to such an approach. It can cause us to miss a text's wider social implications. My connection with the woman's disease made it difficult for me to realize that Jesus wants to free her from all kinds of bondage, the shalom of Sabbath being the full abundance of life Jesus wants for all.

One way to prevent this kind of solipsistic reading is to read the lectionary texts alongside one another. My preaching habit is to focus on one alone. But reading this Luke passage in conjunction with the vision of Isaiah 58:9-14 broadened my imagination. This passage points us to more than individual healing; it is a picture of the restoration of God's people, the shalom of Sabbath, in which the city of God is rebuilt. This helped me to see that Jesus' healing this woman on the Sabbath was more than a physical healing; it was a release from many forms of systemic

bondage.

Another way to guard against narrowly personal readings of texts is to engage in what Lauren Winner calls “[dislocated exegesis](#)”—the practice of reading scripture in different places. How would the story of this woman be read differently in a jail? A psychiatric ward? A foster home? Getting out of the study and reading in different places can open our eyes to possible interpretations we may never have imagined.