

Have you ever been bound by Satan?

Okay, so that's not a question you expect to hear at St John's. Let me ask it another way: Have you ever been caught up in a force that is stronger than you? A force that keeps you from being who God wants you to be?

I have.

I'd be more likely to call it 'perfectionism' or 'anxiety' or 'shame' than 'Satan.' But in a way, it doesn't really matter what I call it. The effect is that I'm bound, trapped, stuck.

When I was on staff here at St John's, about 15 years ago, I developed a curriculum for 4th to 6th grades called Kairos. The rector, Mariann, encouraged me to write up the curriculum so that it could be published. A lot of congregations were looking for something like Kairos at that time. And the associate rector had contacts with Church Publishing.

It was a great opportunity.

I was given time in my schedule to write and a community member who was an editor worked with me regularly. I easily wrote the overview of the curriculum. I wrote the outline of each year's work. I wrote the topic for each session. Then I went on to work on detailed lesson plans.

And I was stuck. I knew HOW to write lesson plans. I had done it before. But for some reason I was unable to write THESE lesson plans.

I worked at it for more than a year and I failed. I was bound by the demon of perfectionism.

I felt I had let the rector and the parish down. I was ashamed. I didn't recognize either the perfectionism or the shame at the time, of course. I was too caught up in the experience of failure. I'm embarrassed to admit it, but it didn't even **occur** to me to pray about the situation. I was just stuck.

The woman we hear about in the gospel today is also stuck. But instead of being bound by something like perfectionism or shame, she was physically stuck. The Greek literally says she was *bent double, and couldn't even lift up her head*. She was used to the situation – she had been bent over for 18 years.

For 18 years she hadn't stood face to face with another person. She hadn't been able to look up at the sky or see the leaves in the trees. She was stuck looking at the ground.

Eighteen years is a very long time.

Women, of course, were expected to take care of the home, to work in the fields and to tend the children and the elderly. She was unable to do much of that because of her ailment. She would have been very socially isolated.

We don't know from the text of Luke whether she usually went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. But on the Sabbath that Jesus was teaching, she did appear there.

I imagine her coming in and slowly making her way around the back of the crowd. Jesus saw her and did a remarkable thing. He interrupted his teaching and called the woman to him. When she approached Jesus, he spoke to her. He said, "Woman, you are free from your ailment."

Jesus saw her and called her and spoke to her. Then he reached out and touched her. Immediately the woman stood up straight and began praising God.

No one had brought her to Jesus' attention. No one asked Jesus to heal her. It seems that God just couldn't wait to set the woman free.

The synagogue official was of course annoyed by what Jesus did and he chided the people in the crowd. He told them that there were six days to do work and that they should come on one of those days to be healed, not on the Sabbath.

But Jesus was having none of it. "Hypocrites!" he said. "You untie your donkey and your ox to lead them to water on the Sabbath. Isn't it right that this woman, who is after all a daughter of Abraham, should be freed from the power of Satan on the Sabbath?"

That shut down Jesus' opponents in the synagogue. The validity of his argument was obvious; they were ashamed.

All of us have places where we are stuck, where we are not free. We might call such places troubled relationships or struggle with addiction or impatience or pride or jealousy. Maybe we have learned to adapt to these places where we aren't free and just live with them.

But even when we don't think to ask, God sees us and calls us and gives us what we need. Sometimes what we need might be healing, like the woman in the story. Sometimes we might need a change of heart or a new way of looking at the world.

God made us to be free. God wants us to be free. What if we cooperated with God's desire for our freedom? What if we prayed to want to be open to God's healing? What if we prayed to let go – just a little – of the need to be perfect or right? What if we prayed to release just a bit of resentment? What if we can't do even that small thing?

The Good News is that when we can't do even that small thing, when we can't do anything to help ourselves, God is working in us.

We can just let God notice us. And God does. God notices us and calls us and speaks to us and touches us and heals us.

You see, God just can't wait to set us free.