

### ***The Word that Frees Us***

*Lord, open our hearts and minds by the Holy Spirit, that we may be set free from any bondages today through the power of your healing Word. Amen.*

Jeremiah 1:4–10, Luke 13:10–17

The picture you see here is called “Jesus and the Bent Over Woman” by Barbara Schwarz, a Dominican Sister of Amityville, New York. What stands out to you in the picture? (...) Jesus doesn’t stand tall, looking down. He bends himself to meet her eyes. Before he lifts her to stand straight, he stoops so she can see his face. Her walking stick is lying on the ground - no longer needed - as Jesus takes her hands.

I often wonder - what did she feel in that moment? Was she afraid? Was she bewildered? Or was she filled with joy she had long forgotten?

In John 1:14, it reads, “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” This is what we see in the painting. Jesus—the living Word of God—comes down to our level, meets us in our weakness, and then raises us up to new life. Both Jeremiah and the bent woman show us that God’s Word is powerful enough to free us from every limitation, every bondage, every crippling word spoken over us by others—or even by ourselves.

### ***Jeremiah’s Call: The Word that Empowers***

In Jeremiah, we hear the story of a boy—or a youth—called by God. He was not ready. He was not trained. He knew nothing about public speaking. So when God called, Jeremiah answered: “Ah, Lord God! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.”

Can you hear the self-doubt in his voice? Perhaps even fear? He looks at himself—his age, his inexperience, his smallness—and he feels inadequate. Have you ever felt that way? Called to something beyond you, but unsure, unprepared, unworthy?

But God does not see Jeremiah’s weakness as an obstacle. God touches his mouth and says, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms: to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

God’s Word is not tame. It tears down what is false and unjust. But it also builds and plants what is true and life-giving. Jeremiah does not rely on his own eloquence or ability—he relies on God’s Word alive in him. And that is still true for us. We may feel like “mere boys or girls”—

inexperienced, untrained, unqualified. But when God calls, God also equips. When God sends, God also provides the words.

### ***The Bent Woman: The Word that Liberates***

Now we turn to Luke's Gospel. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath when he sees a woman who has been bent over for eighteen long years. Imagine that: eighteen years of looking down at the dust, never able to stand tall, always overlooked, always on the margins. Eighteen years of pain, of being judged, of feeling invisible.

But Jesus sees her. He calls her forward. And he speaks: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." With those words, she straightens up and begins praising God. Notice again: it is the Word that does the work. Just as God's word entered Jeremiah's mouth, now God's word from Jesus' lips brings healing, dignity, and freedom.

But not everyone rejoices. The leader of the synagogue objects, because it is the Sabbath. "Healing counts as work," he says. "She should come back tomorrow." After eighteen years of suffering, what difference would one more day make to them?

And yet Jesus insists: the true purpose of the Sabbath is not rule-keeping, but restoration. Sabbath is meant for freedom—for this woman, and for the whole community.

### ***A Story of the Onion***

This tension—the difference between grace freely given and grace withheld—reminds me of a story told by Dostoyevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Once there was a woman who had lived a very wicked life. When she died, her guardian angel searched for a single good deed he could bring before God. At last, he remembered: once she had pulled up an onion from her garden and given it to a beggar. God said, "Take that onion and hold it out to her in the lake of fire. If she takes hold of it, pull her out. If the onion holds, she may come to paradise."

So the angel held out the onion, and she grasped it. He began to pull her gently. She was almost out—when other sinners saw her and began holding on as well. And she kicked them off, shouting, "It's my onion, not yours!" At that, the onion broke, and she fell back into the fire.

The story is sobering. Grace was given, but she clutched it as her possession, not God's gift to be shared. In the end, her refusal to be connected to others cut her off from the very grace she

needed. Isn't that what we see in the synagogue leader? He could not rejoice at the woman's freedom. He could not share in her healing. And so, while she was set free, he remained in bondage.

### *For Us Today*

Friends in Christ, these are not just ancient stories. They are invitations. Where are we like Jeremiah, saying, "I am only a boy," doubting that God could use us? God still says, "Do not be afraid, for I am with you. I have put my words in your mouth."

Where are we like the bent-over woman, weighed down by burdens, unable to look up, perhaps unnoticed by others? Jesus still bends low, meets us at eye level, and says, "You are set free." And where are we, like the woman with the onion, or the synagogue leaders—clinging to rules, pride, or possessions, unable to rejoice in the grace given to another? What cripples us today? Fear, shame, old wounds, unforgiveness, exhaustion? What onions are we clutching as if they were ours alone? And what words do we hear from Jesus today? Perhaps the same words he spoke then: "You are set free."

God's Word empowers. God's Word liberates. God's Word calls us into a new life—both for ourselves and for our community. Like Jeremiah, we may feel unqualified. Like the bent woman, we may feel weighed down. Like the woman with the onion, we may be tempted to hoard grace. But God's Word still comes to us: tearing down what binds us, planting what brings life, and raising us up to stand tall in Christ. So let us listen for that Word. Let us trust that Word. And let us speak that Word of freedom to others, in love and compassion. Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God,  
Pluck up and pull down what cripples us.  
Plant and build what gives life.  
Put your Word in our mouths, so we may speak freedom to others.  
And let us live in the Sabbath rest of Jesus Christ,  
who has already set us free.  
Amen.