

How many of you remember the dance sensation that swept America in 2015 by Silentó? Do any of you remember the name of the dance? 2015 was the summer of the Whip and Nae-Nae dance. The name of the song is “Watch Me,” and that’s what Silentó says over and over throughout the song. Watch me! Watch me! That summer in 2015, I took our youth group on a mission trip to Cincinnati where we worked with a day care center in a low-income housing development, and all of those kids knew how to Whip and Nae-Nae, and for some reason, they all laughed at me when I danced with them, and I have no idea why, because I think I’m a wonderful dancer.

I remember there was a five-year-old girl at the day-care center, who was playing with playdough. She told me she has something very important to show me. So, I watched, as she manipulated the play dough in various ways, all building up to a big reveal that was bound to wow me. And her display went on and on and on. It became clear that she wasn’t building up to anything, and if my eyes would glance away from her for even a moment, she would sternly say, “Watch! Watch this!” And on she went, with no grand finale. She just wanted me to watch her. That week, that song, it became clear to me that all of us want to be seen, to be noticed for who we really are.

To be overlooked and ignored is one of the most painful experiences a person can have. As Jesus teaches in the synagogue on the Sabbath, a woman appears who couldn’t stand up straight. She had this condition for 18 years. Sadly, we don’t learn the woman’s name or her place in the community. Was she a beloved member who everyone knew? Was she present but unseen? We don’t know. What we know is this, even though Jesus was teaching, he noticed her. That’s where the good news begins in this story, with three small but profound words, **“Jesus saw her.”** Jesus sees those who are ignored, marginalized, and left out. What others overlook, Jesus sees, and we all need to be seen. Some of you know that I trace my own calling as a pastor to a period in my life when I felt completely ignored by my classmates. As a young man, walking around the school yard by myself, I prayed that God would befriend me when no one else would. God saw me and heard my prayer.

We live in a time where you can broadcast yourself on a worldwide publishing platform for free, technology that in the past only an elite few could access. In fact, that’s what’s happening to me right now through this service, but anyone can do it on a smart phone. We have the capacity to be seen and heard by more people than ever before in the history of the world, yet how many people feel completely invisible? How many women are overlooked for promotions, for partnership? How many kids are afraid to be their authentic selves for fear of ostracism or worse? How many men fear that if anyone knew who they really are, they’d be labeled weak?

Jesus saw this woman, which is our assurance that God sees you as well. This is a theme we find throughout the scriptures. All the way back in the book of Genesis, it’s Hagar who names **God El Roi—the God who sees**. Hagar was a handmaiden, used and manipulated by both Abraham and Sarah and then cast out when deemed unnecessary. It’s she who names God El Roi—God sees me. Others may overlook or abuse me, but God is the One who both sees and cares for me. Jesus sees the bent-over woman and brings her from the margin to the center. Then Jesus does what he always does, he sets her free: **“Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.**

There is a lot packed into those two verses. First, woman, you are set free. Here's something to ponder. When Jesus set this woman free, he set every woman free. Our prayer of the day so beautifully states, "This is the hour when women long oppressed learn to stand with dignity." We live in a world where women hold up half the sky, yet continue to be under paid, undervalued, and objectified. Women, the dignity you deserve is your God-given birthright. It can be neither given, nor taken away from you by other people. If you wait for someone else to give it to you, you'll settle for less the full freedom you deserve. You must claim it for yourself. Woman, you are set free. You need not make yourself small in a world that pushes you aside. Stand in the divine dignity that is your birthright. And of course, it's not only women who need to be set free, is it? We all do.

How do we live into our divine freedom? How do we learn to stand with dignity? We start where Jesus did, by **speaking our freedom into existence**. Freedom begins by speaking it aloud. It doesn't begin with your situation being changed, but by your language changing. That was true for the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and it was true for the slaves who sang of their freedom on the ships that brought them to this land as chattel. It was true for the suffragettes, and for those who crossed the Edmund Pettis bridge singing "We Shall Overcome." It was true for Richard and Mildred Loving, for Jim Obergefell, and everyone who fought for marriage equality. It's true for everyone in a toxic relationship who finds the courage to say, I deserve to be treated with dignity, and you don't control me anymore.

At some point in our lives, we all need to be freed from something, so we speak into existence the freedom we do not yet see but is ours by birthright. Everyone who has ever marched their way to freedom began by speaking their freedom into the world, and the good news is that God is always on the side of freedom—always. Jesus made this his manifesto way back at the beginning of Luke's gospel that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to preach good news to the poor and to set the captives free. Jesus came to set us free, and if the Son has set you free, then you are free indeed.

Jesus speaks freedom to this woman, and she is free. She is overwhelmed with joy and begins to sing. There's nothing more beautiful to see than a heart set free. But those of you who've stepped into your freedom know that not everyone sings with you, do they? Sadly, it's often religious people who ruin the party, isn't it? Never underestimate how narrow religious people can be, not because they are bad, but because they're bound. It's easy to get upset and dismissive of grumpy religious people, but you must know they're not free. They're still in Egypt. In fact, in the Hebrew language, the word for Egypt means, "narrow place," and the scriptures say that God wants to bring us into a broad place, where there's room to move and grow. But religious people both now and then often feel safer in the confinement of the narrow place. Just like the synagogue leader in this story, they are so worried about the rules, that they miss what the rules were about in the first place.

The Sabbath was given to Israel as a celebration of their freedom from slavery. That's what it was all about—celebration and extending freedom to everyone in your life—your family, those who work for you, your animals, even the land itself. Everyone and everything needs and deserves rest. That's what our Isaiah reading says the sabbath is for. Jesus doesn't overturn God's law. He restores its original intent. Jesus understands the law is never an end in itself. God gives us commands so that we might flourish, and flourishing is always the point. So, when we see people being set free, the only thing to do is join in the song.

That's what the people at the synagogue do. They don't take their cues from the religious leader. They know freedom when they see it, and they rejoice. Because when someone is set free, it's not just the individual who is freed. We all are. They are restored to us, and us to them. It's an exquisite mutuality. And it all starts with seeing. God sees you, and speaks freedom to you, and heals you. We often hear how hurt people hurt people, which is true, **but it works the other way too**. Seen people, see people. Free people, free people. Healed people, heal people. That's how it works—the virtuous cycle of healing where we pass on what we've been given. Of course, if we do this, people will get grumpy and call us names and say we are disobeying the rules. But you don't need to worry about that. They said the same to Jesus who for your sake boldly stood for freedom, and now he's inviting us to do the same. See. Free. Heal. What's left to do but sing...and dance?