



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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AUGUST 25, 2019
THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Set Free Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

As is so often the case, Jesus' eyesight is so much better than mine. When I read the first part of this story from the Gospel of Luke, I see a woman with a severe physical problem suddenly appear in the synagogue. She is bent over double, making it impossible for her to stand up straight. Is it because of an injury she suffered years ago or some infection that attacked her spine? Is she an older person with a degenerative disease? We don't know, but we imagine that it is a painful and difficult condition to live with. As he did on many other occasions, I fully expect Jesus to heal her and send her off to a much better life.

He did heal her, but he did much more than that. When he called her over and placed his hands on her, he did not say simply, "Be healed!" He said something that sounds odd to modern ears: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Set free? How many of you have ever had a doctor tell you that you are "set free"? "Mrs. Jones, it appears that your tendinitis is better and you are set free! Enjoy your tennis." "Timmy, the X-ray looks good, your leg has mended and you can play ball. You are set free!" "Mr. Smith, the lab tests indicate that the infection is gone. You are set free!" Tom, it looks like the kidney stone has passed. You are set free!" In that case, you probably do feel set free!

Why does Jesus use such language. Admittedly, he throws in that language about the woman being bound by Satan. We don't think about illness in that way anymore. By and large, we know that genetics, lifestyle, and environment have a lot to do with our health or lack thereof.

Jesus chose his words carefully, I believe. He is not really concerned about the cause of this woman's eighteen year long illness. His keen depth perception has picked up on all of the effects of the illness on her well-being. He sees that for eighteen years she has struggled to stand upright, to move freely in an often harsh environment, and to feel like herself. He sees that even the simplest of tasks are laborious chores for her. Imagine trying to carry jars of water from the town well in that condition. Imagine gathering wood for a fire, preparing a meal, washing clothes, or tending to children. It

may well have been the case that she was not married because her condition would have been a liability in that day and time that no man or his family wanted to assume. We have to wonder whether or not her situation forced her to beg for sustenance. What other limitations had this severe back problem caused this woman? Jesus sees and understands her plight and that is why he announces that she is set free.

When Jesus saw this woman, he saw so much more than we might have seen. He saw more than an ailment that had bothered her for nearly two decades. He saw a child of God bound by a situation she could not overcome by herself. He saw a sister who longed to be freed from her pain and limitations. When she was able to straighten her back for the first time in eighteen years, she knew that she was free. Praising God, perhaps even dancing a jig, she celebrated the freedom she had been given by Jesus.

What good news freedom is to someone who is captive. This past week we saw the reaction of Dontae Sharpe who was set free from prison after serving nearly twenty-five years of a life sentence for a murder he did not commit. Entering the courtroom amid cheers from his family and friends, he lifted his hands in celebration and relief.¹

Today our nation remembers that it was four hundred years ago that Africans were first bought as slaves in the colonies that would become our nation. The exchange was made in a Virginia port near Jamestown called—ironically—“Point Harmony.” Over twenty Africans, who had been destined for enslavement in Mexico, were exchanged for food for the ship’s crew. Thus began what has become known as “the original sin” of our nation.

On June 19, 1865, a contingent of Union soldiers led by Major General Gordon Granger arrived at Galveston, Texas. One of the General’s first duties was to read a statement proclaiming that the war between the states was over and slavery was officially abolished. Can you imagine the jubilation felt by slaves who had never known a day of freedom in their lives? Surely, when they were told that they were set free, it must have sounded like words from heaven. One hundred and fifty-four years later, the celebration of Juneteenth continues to commemorate that good news.

The proclamation of freedom which President Lincoln signed in 1863 and which became a reality in 1865 was a gift of healing, but recovery has

¹Martha Waggoner, “Freed Man Says He Relied on Mother, God While Behind Bars,” *Associated Press* (Thursday, August 22, 2019).

been slow to come. The truth is that we have all been infected by the disease that caused people to think that one human being could own another human being. We have all been bound by the fallacy that some people are less human than others and somehow deserve to suffer for the pleasure and well-being of the rest of us.

The sad reality is that, to some extent, all of us are in bondage because prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, and their accumulated symptoms have burrowed their way into our bloodstream and compromised our hearts. And it is not a uniquely American problem. This disease is spread across the globe like a dreaded plague. Hardly a geographical spot does not have some group of people who are considered to be “less than” the general population. Scarcely a culture does not turn its ire upon some unfortunate group, blaming them for the ills of the rest. All over the world, people are bent over by this bondage. The burden of its oppressiveness pushes us toward the ground.

When Jesus saw the bent-over woman come into the synagogue, he saw everything that she had to deal with in life. He also took the long view and saw each of us. We, too, can be bound by a lot of things. We can be bound by prejudice, bigotry, and discrimination as a victim or a perpetrator. We can be bound by illnesses of the body, mind, or spirit. We can be bound by addiction, abuse, or cruelty. We can be bound by poverty or by wealth, by poor self image or by ridicule. We can be bound by responsibilities we have assumed or by obligations thrust upon us. We can be bound by a dysfunctional family, an abusive relationship, a bad job, the wrong career, an unwieldy debt, or a hostile neighborhood. We can physically be bound in prison or spiritually bound in the darkness of our sin. We can be bound by a lack of opportunities or by our own unwillingness to seek a better life. We can be bound and shackled by many things. Jesus sees our captivity and joyfully announces, “You are set free!”

How I wish Jesus were physically here to touch each of us as he did the woman in that synagogue and declare that we are set free from horrible things that bind us from living fully. Was this kind of freedom intended only for that woman and not for us?

In his inaugural sermon, Jesus sat in the synagogue where he had learned scripture and heard the story of God and his people. He looked into the eyes of the people who knew him best, friends and relatives whom he loved dearly, and he said,

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke 4:18-19

When he wrote to the Galatian Christians, The Apostle Paul echoed Jesus when he said, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). He was speaking directly to Gentile Christians who were being pressured by Jewish believers to convert to Judaism before fully embracing Christ. He would not tolerate the burden of another faith to be placed upon new believers who wanted to stand for Jesus. His rallying cry is an amplification of Jesus’ happy declaration, “You are set free!” I believe he was also speaking to us. But how are we to receive or offer this gift today?

In a sermon preached on June 5, 1966 in the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke on the topic of “Guidelines for a Constructive Church” and said, “This is the role of the church: to free people. This merely means to free people who are slaves.” If I read the Gospel correctly, that pretty much means all of us!

One of the gifts of our salvation is the calling to share the Gospel with the world. We are the ones who bring good news to our world. Ours are the hands of Jesus who bring healing to crippled souls. Ours are the hopeful voices that speak encouragement to a desperate world. Ours are the hearts full of compassion that help Jesus fling open the prison doors of all that binds us.

The Gospel calls us to change our world to eliminate prejudice and oppression of all kinds. It calls us to provide care for one another so that the illnesses of the body can be addressed, the illnesses of the mind can be soothed, and the illnesses of the spirit can be relieved. The Gospel calls us to reform our lives so that we do not bring harm to other people and to enable other people to escape harmful circumstances. The Gospel call us to change our communities, our nation, our world, our families, and our lives so that no one is bent over double simply for the pleasure and well-being of someone else.

When one of us, or someone we know, is bound by some horrible ill of life, the Church should be ready to help, to guide, to stand with us as we seek

freedom from whatever it is that ails us. Our calling is to free people who are captive.

Mind you, not everyone likes this good news. When Jesus healed the woman who had been sick for eighteen years, the synagogue erupted in celebration, but the Leader, who could not see anything good beyond the rules he had followed for a lifetime, kept shouting over the praises, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." He was doing all that he could to keep the yoke firmly on the shoulders of his people. Jesus, however, reminded him of the hypocrisy of taking care of a beast of burden like an ox or a donkey on the sabbath while denying a daughter of Abraham, a child of God, the opportunity to be relieved of her burden on that same day.

Burdensome yokes are everywhere. People are told, "You are not smart enough, pretty enough, tall enough, wealthy enough, poor enough, strong enough, talented enough, red or yellow or black or white or brown enough to be treated fairly in this world." Our calling as the Church of Jesus Christ is to remove the shackles that bind us, to announce good news of freedom to all people, and to show them the way to that freedom through the life that we live. If you remember from the brief excerpt we heard earlier from the Book of Jeremiah, Jeremiah was hesitant to become a prophet because of his perceived limitations, one of which was his age. He said, "Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the Lord answered, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you" (Jeremiah 1:6-8). God had called Jeremiah for a particular task, to be a certain kind of person, to live in a special way. God would provide what Jeremiah needed to fulfill that calling. God will provide for us as well. As Paul would later affirm, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

At some point, in some way, we are all bound by something. What binds you? What "ailment" has you in its clutches? What burden is bending you over, pressing you down? God in Christ offers to free us of those shackles. God in Christ declares that we are set free!

"I have come to declare the release of captives," Jesus said. "For freedom Christ has set you free." Embrace the Gospel. Fulfill God's calling! Live freely the life God has graciously given to you! Amen!

August 25, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We find ourselves once again at that time of year when we want to hang onto the last days of vacation but the obligations of school and work and other duties call loudly to us, O God. We are grateful for times of rest and relaxation that we enjoyed these past few months. We thank you for time spent with friends and family. We appreciate the precious moments that we shared alone with you.

As schools reopen their doors, we pray for students, teachers, and staff who step again into the great adventure of learning. We pray for open and eager minds to gain knowledge and the wisdom of how best to use it. We pray for teachers who will use their skill and their compassion to shape the lives of their students. We pray for administrators and staff whose task it will be to create environments that invite learning and growth. We pray for all of our schools to be safe and engaging places of learning.

We also pray for each person who has special needs of body, mind, or spirit. We know that you are already with each one, guiding care and resources to their need. Make them also aware of your presence and grant them your peace.

We pray for our community as we make decisions about our leadership and our future. Help us to make wise choices that will benefit all citizens and lead us into opportunities that will bring vibrancy and opportunity to all. Above all, remind us that we are neighbors to one another and dependent upon one another. Heal and bless us, we pray.

Today, when we recall the beginning of slavery in our land four hundred years ago, we seek forgiveness for this sin which has harmed us all. Teach us the worth and dignity of all people because we are your children. Bless our nation with your grace, O God. Grant us wisdom as we chart our future. Grant us courage as we confront challenging issues. And enlarge our compassion as we learn how better to live together.

We thank you, O God, for the wonderful world you have given to us and for all that it provides for us. Help us to be good stewards of all of life, we pray, and to live gratefully day by day, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.