

Freed!

Galatians 3:23-29

Luke 8:26-39

6/23/19

“Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith could be revealed.” The image of imprisonment and the even more troubling image of a man possessed of evil, unable to care for himself, cut off from society are images we need to carefully consider. The power of sin and of evil to destroy lives is real. That’s true for countless in our world and it’s also true for us in our comfortable existences.

Our engagement today with this message reminds us of the incredible freedom we have received. And it also comes with a challenge as we anticipate the fullness of the reign of God. To use theological terms, it is both a witness to our realized salvation and the anticipated salvation that awaits in the fullness of the God’s reign.

The message of Galatians is that we have been freed from a legalistic obeying of rules. But do we understand and appreciate the imprisonment that Galatians described? We, good Presbyterians, may need to hear that message more than most. Those who count themselves as having been liberated from among the tombs, from the possession of evil understand freedom because they understand imprisonment. We may be blind to the chains that bind us. We often fail to see the need for liberation from something so seemingly so good as law and good works.

Jesus often sparred with the religious types in the gospels. These folks lived on the “right” side of the lake. They understood the Law. They consciously did good works. There were lifelong adherents to the faith. If we encountered one of them today, we would gladly invite that person to church, encourage joining, ask for a pledge, and expect some significant volunteer time.

What was Jesus’ beef with these kinds of perfect church members? These religious types looked down at “sinners”, failing to recognize their own sinfulness. Their good works were done for the sake of impressing others, impressing themselves, even foolishly thinking they could impress God. They believed the good they did was because of their own righteousness, failing to recognize that God’s grace and a privileged life made it possible for them to do good.

When we have lived a blessed life in the church, we can be easily tempted to believe we are good because of our own efforts. When we slip into that way of thinking, we revert right back to being ruled by a law which demands perfection. We find ourselves again trying to impress others, impress ourselves, and even foolishly trying to impress God. And that is a prison.

We fail to understand how serious an imprisonment this is. Considering the story of the man from the tombs can help us recognize the incredible gift of salvation, because his story overlaps with our own stories more than we might like to admit.

We don't know his history, his life, how he came to be so broken in spirit and body. We can easily image a life of abuse inflicted by others or inflicted by his own poor choices that might have brought him to this point. Genetic science and psychology of today tell us his condition, which certainly had been made worse by his treatment at the hands of others, could have been dictated even before he was born.

That's a troubling reality we face in our own world. It is a huge injustice that a child could be born, could grow up in loving home, could have been given the best opportunities, and yet she could still wind up as broken as this man in the tombs. Humanities need for salvation is a need for deliverance from our own choices, from the horrible sins we inflict on each other, and from the brokenness of creation. Little wonder we are told that creation groans under the burden of sin, yearning for the day when the creator will make all things right.

Each of our life stories bear the marks of these three wounds. Each of us was born with setbacks beyond anyone's control. Each of us have suffered at the hands of others, intentionally or not. And each of us have sinned ourselves, making choices that harmed ourselves and others. I know that many enjoy more privilege than others in our world, and that is an important consideration when it comes to issues of justice, but when we consider our own need for salvation, we need to also face the depth of our own need, if we are going to understand the incredible freedom we have been given.

Jesus crosses one of the greatest barriers of his day to reach the man. Metaphorically this is represented by the body of water he crossed. Jesus, an observant Jew, crossed into the Gentile world where he freed this man. The deep truth of human salvation is even more stunning. Jesus, God almighty, was incarnate as human, crossing the barrier between divinity and mortality, between perfection and fallenness, to bring salvation to this world. We know the verse so well we may discount it. "God so loved the world, God gave his only Son." Our need for salvation is massive. And the path God took to bring that is immeasurable.

Galatians tells us we are freed from all foolish striving. Baptism washes away our sinfulness. And even more astounding is the description that Galatians uses for how we now find ourselves. We are "clothed" with Christ. Our freedom isn't just a release from the tyranny of the Law. We are given the person of Christ to wear. The fires of Pentecost are still warm and that reminds us that not only are we given the righteousness of Christ, but we are also given the power of Christ. We have been baptized with the same Spirit that made it possible for him to go into the world. We have been freed from our tombs and now we are to go into the world to free the possessed living in their tombs.

Christ came to save humanity. We often think of that as just an individual action. But the inbreaking reign of God in the world is also seeking to transform culture, to bring salvation in our families, our churches, and our societies. We see in the work to abolish slavery, the movement to end child labor, civil rights reform, recognition of the rights of women, and many, many more.

Why do these changes take so long? Why is this change such a struggle? Our story about the man in the tombs gives us a simple and straightforward explanation. When Jesus banished the demons, they entered a heard of pigs that promptly charged off a cliff into the sea. That was an economic disaster for someone. When Jesus comes into our world, when the reign of God fills our world, bringing healing and change, there will be significant economic and cultural impacts.

Take our consumer culture. Everyone here is caught up in it. Those with less covet what those with more have. Those with more seek to carefully guard what they have. Many of us spend significant money and time insuring we have a comfortable life and that those in our families enjoy nice vacations, quality clothing, good food, and comfortable homes.

If a prophet like Jesus entered our midst and took actions which threatened that life financially and culturally, we would probably act just like those towns people. Those with more would certainly invite the prophet to leave. Those with less would probably do the same because their hopes for a more affluent life would be jeopardized by the changes this prophet would bring.

We see incredible gits of deliverance that happen in our lives and in the lives of others. People are being freed from a life in the tombs. Personal histories are being redeemed. But we are now faced with the very difficult question. Do we see the miracles of deliverance and it strikes fear into our hearts because we don't want our world changed? Are we willing to give up our lives of comfort and our affluence so that others can be freed? Are we willing to face our greediness and our fear of change?

One example from the headlines. Our treatments of immigrants in this country is far removed from anything approaching justice. Locking people in cages who are seeking a better life is not a solution. Ignoring the real problems of economic disparity that exist in our own hemisphere is wrong. Our current system has been built and supported by leaders of both parties over the years. Immigrants have been mistreated as political pawns. We, who call ourselves Christian, no matter our political leanings, should be calling on our leaders to address these issues in real and meaningful ways, even if it will alter our lives.

There is good news that goes with that challenge. Jesus knows that our need for deliverance from our greed and from our fear of change is a lifelong work. The Spirit is certainly up to dealing with this while leading us into the tombs to encounter those who need to be freed. When we go into the tombs to help others, the Spirit makes it possible for us to give up our privilege and comfort for the sake of others.

We are freed! We are being freed! We are saved! We are being saved! We have been delivered from the tombs. We go now in the tombs of the world to share our story and offer God's deliverance to others. One sign of how much transformation is happening in our hearts is this. When we are blessed to be the ones through whom Jesus brings deliverance to someone, we might find ourselves as disinvited as Jesus was. Others will see how the world will be changed by God and will see us as the problem. When that happens know that is a sign of how much more like Christ you have become. And know in that moment that you are freed! Amen.