

Free and Bound
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Isaiah 61:1-4
Galatians 5:1, 13-15

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I remember it well. A friend who was professor of dance at Oberlin college created a modern piece some years ago in which she was the solo performer. She wore a white leotard with flowing white scarves and skimmed across the stage, leaping and twirling, arms outstretched, head back. But then her movements became more confined, more self-contained. She sank to the floor, and appeared to be trying to pull up and away from invisible restraints that held her to the earth.

Then she seemed to break free and was once again flying around the stage, but after a few leaps, she kept looking back to the spot on the floor where she had earlier been tied down in some way. She danced the tension between two, going back and forth between soaring leaps and tightly controlled movements in a small space. Finally, she ended her dance kneeling on the spot on the floor that was both a place she had chosen and one that confined her. Yet, as she knelt, her arms reached upward and moved like wings.

My friend called her dance "Free and Bound". The program notes indicated that she was expressing the joys and challenges of being an artist and a wife and mother. She found her days to be a pattern in which she moved back and forth between independence and the chosen confines of relationship and family life. It was a creative tension that caused her many moments of joy and also times of frustration and pain. Her dance was one which spoke to me, and many others, in a deep and powerful way.

Freedom. As we approach a holiday celebrating freedom as a political construct, perhaps we should consider how freedom is viewed in contemporary American society. Perhaps we should also explore the nature of freedom on a more personal and spiritual level. How are we free? How are we bound? What does Jesus teach us about the connection between freedom and love?

Liberation is a biblical theme that runs throughout the Scriptures. God sees the suffering of the enslaved people of Israel and breaks the chains holding them in Egypt, bringing them out of bondage and into a new land. The prophets speak symbolically and poetically about the God who loves those who are oppressed, the God who will liberate them from all that keeps them from living a free and abundant life:

The passage we heard read from Isaiah this morning is an example of this liberating word.: *The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for God has anointed me. [God] has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up hearts that are broken; to proclaim liberty to captives, freedom to those in prison.* (Isaiah 61:1-3)

And in Isaiah 58:6, God says, *Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?* Jesus tells his followers, *"you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."*(John 8:32), and Paul reminds the Galatians: *For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* (Galatians 5:1)

Paul writes often about freedom. He reminds the early Christians that Jesus came to show how life should be lived, with joy and compassion, free from the addictions that frequently enslave us to material goods or self-centered pursuits. Paul also loves to consider the topsy turvy nature of freedom and servanthood. We are spiritually free, but we are not to abuse our freedom in the selfish pursuit of power and control over others. We should be both "free and bound," free in spirit, but tied to others through service and kindness:

Though I am free and belong to no man, says Paul, I make myself a servant to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:19) For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for evil, but through love be servants of one another. (Galatians 5:13).

What a different image of freedom than the phrase tossed around in national and world news this past week! A slim Supreme Court majority declares that U.S. citizens have a constitutionally guaranteed freedom to keep a loaded handgun at home, never mind the statistics which show how often these guns get into the hands of criminals who take freedom, possessions, and even life itself from others.

An election in Zimbabwe is determined to be a sham, no longer free and fair, and the opposition candidate withdraws in protest, fearing for the safety of his followers. Yet, the one in power forces an oppressed population to the polls where votes are obtained by coercion. A U.S. millionaire is convicted of keeping Indonesian women working in his mansion as virtual slaves, confiscating their passports and identity documents and using threats and physical force to keep them from leaving or talking to police. He tells the court they were “free” to leave at any time.

What does freedom mean when it loses the context of personal responsibility or national accountability? What happens when an exercise of freedom for some takes away the liberty, safety, or privileges belonging to another? How does our freedom to earn an income impact someone else’s quality of life? We see slick advertisements in our newspapers and magazines on how to achieve “financial freedom,” a concept of personal wealth that elevates selfishness to a virtue. We admire rugged individualism as the American ideal, the guy in the movie who says and does what he wants and needs no one.

I attended a conference a couple of weeks ago in Monterey, California which was sponsored by the Westar Institute, home to theologians and scholars associated with the Jesus Seminar. Dr. Lane McGaughy, Professor Emeritus of Religious and Ethical Studies at Willamette University in Oregon, offered a fascinating look at how the Bible has been used in American history and tradition.

Like many others, McGaughy believes that we in this country have created an American civil religion, an unconscious confusion of piety and patriotism. One of the symbols important to this civil religion is that of the superhero. McGaughy mentioned an important book on this topic, **The Myth of the American Superhero**, by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2002.)

Jewett and Lawrence point out that American culture has engendered a unique hero myth, one that is different from earlier classical hero myths. In classic Greek mythology, for instance, the hero leaves his community to test his strength against a worthy opponent, and using superior skill and weapons, defeats the enemy. The hero then returns to his home community and uses his special powers to assist in its expansion. It is a classic myth of physical conquest and domination.

The American superhero story, however, does not fit this classical pattern. In American movie mythology, there is a utopian community that is threatened by evil. An outsider arrives to free the community from danger or enslavement and using superior skills and weapons, defeats the enemy. However, having saved the community, the hero vanishes. He cannot stay and be part of the day to day life that follows, but must ride off into the sunset or go back into hiding and secrecy. Think about the classic Westerns like “Shane” and “The Pale Rider”.

Now compare the biblical redeemer story, the one where Christ assumes the role of a mythic hero, to both the classical and American hero myth formulas. In the biblical story, just as in the American hero myth, a hero arrives who saves a community threatened by danger, freeing it from fear and the powers of evil. There is a striking difference, however. Unlike the heroes of classical myths and American movies, Jesus, the biblical hero, is not a warrior figure. In fact, he seems at first to be defeated and must be rescued by a higher power

before he can complete his mission. Then, as the result of an act of sacrificial love, the Redeemer figure of the biblical tradition defeats the enemy, saves the community, and vanishes.

Jewett and Lawrence surmise that our American superhero stories of today have resulted from an uneasy combination of the old classical hero myth with the biblical redeemer story. The superheroes in American culture save the day and liberate a community in distress, but violence must be used to defeat the enemy. American movie heroes like Clint Eastwood, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and John Wayne are lonely figures who save terrorized communities by their superior fighting skills. There are only a few movies in American culture where the hero fits the Christ-like model of nonviolent, sacrificial love. At our discussion in Monterey a couple of weeks ago, our group could only think of three: Cool Hand Luke, To Kill A Mockingbird, and Witness, a movie filmed in an Amish community.

I find myself asking what it means for our culture to place such a premium on good being achieved through force. I wonder about the nature of redemptive violence used in the cause of freedom. Can we truly be free as a society, if our global prominence is based on military strength or the brute force of corporate or industrial power?

Jesus reminds us that real freedom is closely connected to love. The greatest commandment is to love God with all one's heart and soul and mind. And the second greatest commandment is like it: love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus also echoed Isaiah's words, the scripture reading for today, in the passage from Luke which was our text last Sunday. Jesus saw his own ministry as lifting oppression, freeing those who were imprisoned by structures or systems that kept them in spiritual, physical, political, or economic bondage. As Christians, that is also our own vocation.

Matthew Fox points out that Jesus invites people to love others as they love themselves. This is a twin commandment: to have compassion for one's self while also showing compassion to others. Real spiritual freedom begins with an acceptance of ourselves, being able to see our lives as good, with beauty, meaning and purpose. Only then are we asked to love others. This is what keeps our self-love from becoming self-centered. We are free, yes, but we are invited to tie ourselves to the lives of others. Free and bound.

Perhaps we should not be celebrating independence, this weekend, but interdependence. Ghandi said, "I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find God apart from the rest of humanity." The mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that "one creature sustains another, one enriches another, and that is why all creatures are interdependent."

Jesus tells us to "Be compassionate, as your Creator is compassionate." (Luke 6:36). And God's compassion extends to humans and all other life forms, everything that lives and breathes and moves. So, our practice of compassion must be deep and wide. Matthew Fox calls it practicing a "consciousness of equality". We are intimately connected to everything and everyone in ways we can't see and can hardly imagine. Fox writes:

Two people who sit together in the same room are exchanging water vapor within thirty minutes. That is interdependence. To take a deep breath is to breathe in some of the breath that Jesus breathed on the cross, we are assured by scientist Brian Swimme. This is interdependence. Every square mile of soil on our earth contains particles from every other square mile of soil on our earth, says biologist John Storer. This is interdependence. (Original Blessing, p.280)

We have to let go of our illusion of separateness. Independence is not really possible in the biological world. And this is also true for other systems and institutions, whether they be national, political, economic, or religious. Perhaps we need a new symbol that expresses the reality of interdependence, one we could wear on our wrists or on a necklace at our throats. Personally, I have always liked knots, especially the intricate spirals of Celtic knots.

The *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols*, by J.C. Cooper, describes the knot as an ambivalent symbol since all powers of binding also imply those of loosing, of restraining but also uniting; the harder it is pulled the firmer it becomes and the greater the union. To me, knots describe the complexity of relationship. Recognizing our interdependence means being in right relationship, and right relationship means honoring the ancient truth of loving another while also loving one's self.

Loving God with our heart, soul, and mind, practicing compassion, treating ourselves gently, understanding the connections which knot us together, these things allow us to experience freedom of spirit. But the Bible also warns us to be watchful of ways where we become enslaved to destructive thoughts or emotions. Paul said, *For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for evil, but through love be servants of one another.* (Galatians 5:13). We must look hard at our lives and examine the thoughts and practices that keep us from being whole or healthy or kind.

Many of us long to be freed from our anger, addiction, greed, or depression. Others of us may ignore the parts of our personal lives that keep us from being truly compassionate. We may do great things and work hard for justice, but still not see the things we do and say in our personal lives that often defeat the very goals we seek. Thomas Jefferson once wrote that "the art of happiness is the art of avoiding pain." Yet all of Jefferson's happiness at his Monticello home, his whole "art of avoiding pain," came at the cost of inflicting pain on others - the pain of slavery. Slaves built Jefferson's home and rebuilt it. Slaves cultivated his gardens and fields. Slaves cared for his grandchildren and served his friends.

This did not stop Jefferson from speaking out against slavery and writing about it in his only book. He saw the evil in slavery, sought to prevent its spread into the western territories, and even offered legislation for emancipation. But he was a paradox. The man who spent so much of his life working for freedom allowed his own personal comfort to exist at the expense of slaves. (www.pbs.org)

Before we are too critical of Jefferson, we might want to step back and look at the practices in our own lives which keep us from living freely and compassionately. How does our own pursuit of happiness affect the liberty of others? How are the threads of our own lives knotted to those we don't know or see? I, for one, am often guilty of making quick purchases without taking the time to investigate who made the product and under what conditions. I like the convenience of my car and have seen the irony of driving several miles across town to attend a meeting to discuss the problems of global warming. I sometimes find myself buying cheap fruits and vegetables rather than paying a little more to get them from local farmers or from organic sources.

Living in a way that recognizes our interdependence. Cultivating a consciousness of compassion. Respecting the equality of others. These are easy phrases, but hard to put into practice, whether in our national policies, economic institutions, or our own personal lives. We all long to soar into the air with great flying leaps, unhindered by those we know or those we don't see, the ones who sometimes seem to keep us tied to the floor. They pull at our sleeves, reminding us of their presence, making it hard for us to maintain our illusion of separateness. Like the dancer, we find ourselves both repelled by them and drawn to them. They ask much of us, yet we love them. We choose to accept the ties of relationship because we know that we can still dance.

Biblical wisdom is often expressed as two opposing truths which somehow fit together in a mysterious way. In order to save our lives, we must lose them. The first shall be last. She who would be great should become least.

May we find a way to dance in the middle of opposites, living free in spirit, yet bound to one another and to our fragile planet. We are knotted together, yet we are also dancers who can raise our arms like wings.

AMEN.