

“Amazing Grace”

sermon digest

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John 8:31-36; Galatians 5:1, 13-14

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The Statue of Liberty opened again for business last week after a long recovery from the devastating floods of Hurricane Sandy. You know the story. The monument to freedom was a gift from France to commemorate the nation's preservation of democracy following the U.S. Civil War and to bond the friendship between the U.S. and France. Our country designed and constructed the pedestal on what became known as Liberty Island, and Lady Liberty was dedicated in 1886. By now, most of us have visited the national landmark; and we have been moved by inspiring stories of immigrants passing through Ellis Island, who saw the tall lady as a symbol of liberty and the sign of welcome to a new world and a new life. The poem by Emma Lazarus posted at the base has long characterized the ideal of liberty in this nation: “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses, yearning to breath free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore, Send these, the homeless, tempest tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”

Although the Statue is growing old, 127 years in fact, she will probably always be worth the expense and effort for restoration from attacks by winds, floods, corrosion, and age. I would dare say that this is one national landmark familiar to every citizen, perhaps to everyone in the world. Even school children know that she is a symbol of liberty, yet all of us are also aware that symbols are only as good as the truth behind them.

The truth reflected in more than two centuries of U.S. history is an irony of conflicting attitudes. This nation of immigrants has often been less than welcoming to immigrants-come-lately. Irish, Poles, Mexicans and Asians who came in search of freedom from oppression or economic depravation have often been met with ridicule, bigotry, and exclusion. In early America, some came as indentured servants under contract to work off their passage to the new world. Others found that opportunity was limited by racial or national prejudice. How strange! The rejected masses of earlier generations have often joined the rejecting majority. One has to wonder if the present national debate over immigration will render the Emma Lazarus poem at the base of the Statue a relic of a bygone era.

Fran Salone-Pelletier is a friend in the International Council of Community Churches, a hospital chaplain and writer. A recent sermon “I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me” tells of her childhood experience as a first generation Italian-American whose parents immigrated from southern Italy. Born into an Italian family, she entered kindergarten speaking broken English. Compared to the other children, her hair and skin were dark. Her blue-eyed, fair-skinned classmates carried cute little metal lunch boxes filled with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a thermos of milk, while her brown-bag lunch always oozed with the cooking oil her mother used to prepare her Italian bread sandwich. She wrote: “There was no way to disguise the foreign lunch or save it from the chorused ‘Yuck!’ I threw away my lunch every day. It was not welcome. I was not welcomed. I was a stranger in the foreign land of peanut butter and jelly, two items my parents had never encountered.”

As I read Fran's story, I realized again that bigotry at whatever age is cruel and unfair. I also realized that real empathy was beyond my experience. The irony of freedom is further complicated by the fact that the people who most value liberty are those who have known bondage. We all know that children can be cruel. We are also aware that we learn prejudice from parents and peers, but it seems that the tendency to exclude and ridicule comes with the package of life. Most of us seem born with a tendency to measure our worth at someone else's expense. Until we have walked in their shoes we do not understand.

Freedom is an elusive concept. Jesus was born a Jew in an economically and politically oppressed nation, the son of peasants. The economic, social, and political dimensions of life were the primary interest of family and friends, even when their identity as a people was primarily religious. So Jesus was often heard by friend and foe as a social reformer and a political revolutionary. His gospel was never a benign spiritual message that could be ignored by the Kings Herod, the Roman Prefect Pontius Pilate, or the Jewish Sanhedrin. His message as well as his very existence threatened the powers that be, whether political or religious. He was crucified with the charge “King of the Jews” attached to the cross. Luke records in Acts that even his disciples were confused. Their question at the Ascension (Acts 1:6) was, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” All the way to the end, his closest companions expected that the gospel message of Jesus would result in material reform of the political and social order, establishing the world dominance of the Chosen People.

Some seven decades after the cross, the Fourth Gospel views Jesus in conflict with his people over the history of Israel and the nature of true freedom. In John, Jesus speaks of the deeper spiritual meaning of

his message, “you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” taken as an insult to his Jewish audience. As children of Abraham, they had never been slaves to anyone. But Jesus speaks of truth that makes you free and true freedom that seems to transcend the political-social context of the time.

We need to tread this path with caution. Over the centuries, Christians have been guilty of “spiritualizing” the gospel. While supporting slavery, Christian slave-owners have chosen to limit freedom to the inner-chambers of the soul, purely a matter of thought and attitude without any hope or reference to the socio-political realities. Jesus may not have come into the Roman world to depose the kings and Caesars, his kingdom was not of this world, yet the real measure of the effect of his gospel on the world has been in the socio-political reality. The word *truth* in Greek can be translated “real.” It pictures pulling back the veil that hides the essence of reality. Far from a harmless spirituality, the gospel strikes the core of our existence right where we live.

When Jesus visited the synagogue of his hometown Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19), he opened the Isaiah scroll and read about actions that affect the physical conditions of this world: “[God] 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.”

The message from Isaiah addressed the captivity of the Babylonian Exile; Jesus repeated the word of liberation under the oppression of the Roman world. Paul’s letter of liberation to Galatian Christians addressed the religious issue of Jewish legalism. Indeed, freedom is an elusive concept. The word appears to have meaning for those who have known captivity and precisely in context with each experience of enslavement.

In my seminary experience in Fort Worth, Texas, students and faculty were encouraged to proclaim the gospel wherever and whenever they could find an opportunity. In the downtown rescue missions for street people, the poor residents of the facilities were subjected to a barrage of evangelistic poundings from student ministers practicing their trade. One of my professors John Newport told of having a go at the street missions. After he had spoken on “the truth will set you free” to a “captive” congregation, required to listen to a sermon in order to earn a meal and a bed, he spoke personally to one of the men after the service. Reeking with alcohol and days of pillaging for usable trash in dumpsters, the fellow protested that he could not give up his freedom for the religious commitment Newport had to offer.

Freedom is an elusive term. Even Paul’s proclamation of liberty in Christ is the freedom to choose a new bondage. The Apostle to Gentiles comes down to the final challenge to Galatians, “through love become slaves to one another.” The message of Christian liberty comes down to a very personal question, “what is my bondage for which I seek release?”

What is your bondage? We who throw stones at our neighbors tend to be totally blind to the glass that forms the walls of our houses. The story added to the Gospel in John 8 about the woman caught in the act of adultery and brought before Jesus for judgment is a fortunate mistake. Jesus is cited with the immortal lesson, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” As long as you are sober, throw stones at the alcoholics. If you are thin, pick on obesity. If you are straight, blast the gays. If you are Christian, damn the Jews.

There is a better way. Just as we must look at the realities of history in this nation, we need to examine our own lives and experiences against the call for Christian liberation.

Shortly after the American Revolutionary War, a young man William Wilberforce was elected to British Parliament. At the time of his election he had recently experienced conversion in the Christian faith and became friends with leading anti-slavery activist of his time. His conviction about the nature of Christian liberty and the inhumanity of the slave trade led to twenty-six years of steady pressure on Parliament to end the practice in Britain. The Slave Trade Act of 1807 did not end slavery, but it ended the commerce of trading in human flesh. One of the people who influenced both the faith and the politics of Wilberforce was John Newton, a former ship’s captain in the slave industry. Newton had a conversion at sea that led not only to leaving the slave trade, but to becoming a primary leader in the campaign to end the trade and a strong influence on Wilberforce.

I grew up singing his hymn “Amazing Grace” as an evangelical message about my own personal experience with God and the wonder of God’s grace, but the history has changed the message for me. Newton found release from the captivity of his profession through the gospel. The song is a hymn of liberation.

When I reflect on the struggle of my nation with the concept of liberty and justice for all, I have to be honest with myself. Had I lived in the eighteenth century, I probably would have been captive of the same attitudes that afflicted my ancestors. My family prizes a letter that is now in a museum somewhere in Texas from William Cross to his son, written from a battlefield in Mississippi during the Civil War. My great, great grandfather William Cross died at Shiloh defending the institution of slavery. His letter is a loving message of hope and faith to his beloved son, yet he was captive of an institution that contradicts everything we find true in Christ.

Let freedom ring throughout the world, but as we sing, let us hear anew the word of Christ: throw stones only if you are certain that you are without fault. In truth that sets us free, none of us qualifies.