

Rev. Dr. Tom Glenn
“Set Free From Bondage”
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood
Sunday, August 25, 2019

Jeremiah 1:4-10

*If you return, O Israel,
says the Lord,
if you return to me,
if you remove your abominations from my presence,
and do not waver,
and if you swear, ‘As the Lord lives!’
in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
then nations shall be blessed by him,
and by him they shall boast.
For thus says the Lord to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem:
Break up your fallow ground,
and do not sow among thorns.
Circumcise yourselves to the Lord,
remove the foreskin of your hearts,
O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
or else my wrath will go forth like fire,
and burn with no one to quench it,
because of the evil of your doings.*

*Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say:
Blow the trumpet through the land;
shout aloud and say,
‘Gather together, and let us go
into the fortified cities!’
Raise a standard towards Zion,
flee for safety, do not delay,
for I am bringing evil from the north,
and a great destruction.
A lion has gone up from its thicket,
a destroyer of nations has set out;
he has gone out from his place
to make your land a waste;
your cities will be ruins
without inhabitant.
Because of this put on sackcloth,
lament and wail:
‘The fierce anger of the Lord
has not turned away from us.’*

On that day, says the Lord, courage shall fail the king and the officials; the priests shall be appalled and the prophets astounded. Then I said, ‘Ah, Lord God, how utterly you have deceived this people and Jerusalem, saying, “It shall be well with you”, even while the sword is at the throat!’

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Let us pray. Gracious God. May we know your spirit in our midst. May we listen carefully to your Word. May my words somehow reflect your way and your truth and your life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

And Jesus said to this woman, "Be set free from this bondage," this woman, who had approached him with a crippling physical ailment in which she was bent over and could not stand straight. Now we don't know all of the factors that may have been involved in her condition. It simply was not written, but we do know that she certainly had been bound in bondage to this ailment. For 18 years she had suffered. She had suffered this ailment and in the presence of Jesus, she was liberated. She was set free. Now I'm sure, as you are aware, there are many forms of bondage. Perhaps one of the worst kinds of bondage is enslavement, being the property of another human being with no freedom and no rights. But bondage can also be as a result of mental illness. It can be psychological, as we say, or it can be circumstantial. Feeling bound up because of a nasty divorce, feeling unfree inside of ourselves because of deep grief, unfree because certain assumptions are made about us by those close to us that may not be true, unfree because inside of ourselves we lack self-worth and have a continuing habit of beating up on ourselves. We could go on and on, I'm sure, with making a list. We don't know what all the causes of this woman's ailment are, but in the presence of Jesus we do know that she was cured, and we know that Jesus was teaching in a synagogue, and it was the Sabbath day. It was the Sabbath day, and that became potentially problematic. In fact, it became problematic because in the eyes of the religious leaders, and especially in the eyes of the leader of this synagogue, what Jesus did in curing that woman who came to him was wrong. It did not accord with religious custom. It was, in this leader's mind, a violation of the Sabbath law, and so Jesus was rebuked. Rebuked in front of the synagogue. However, there was a response. Jesus did respond accusing him and other religious leaders of hypocrisy. And meanwhile, amidst all of this, the crowd is rejoicing at the healing. Now it could be a risk sometimes to help someone, to give aid to someone, in freeing them from bondage. It can mean misunderstanding on the part of others. But as was the case with Jesus, it can mean downright opposition of the leaders and of those in power and therefore, it can put one in potential danger. It did put him in danger.

Now I had a huge boost in my own learning about what it means to help someone toward the goal of freedom. I had a huge boost when I took my first call at a church in Tucson, Arizona, I was called to be their youth minister. I was 28 years old at the time. And I will have to say, looking back, I think my main qualification for that job was my age. It certainly was not my vast wisdom. It certainly was not deep experience in real life. I, of course, had a little experience and I did have a lot of book knowledge. But not a ton of life experience.

And this woman, one of my teachers, in this church. A woman named Edna Hudle,r was one of my teachers. She was a retired school teacher. In many respects, Edna was an unusual person. I have to say she was not always easy to be around, she could be downright annoying sometimes. She was kind of a pain at times. She did call me once, I recall. I think it was on my day off but nevermind. She called me up on the phone and she was virtually yelling over the phone, "The Indians are here! The Indians are here!" Political correctness was not her forte. "The Indians are here, get over here right now!" click. Okay. She could be kind of a pain and I went over to her house and the living room was filled with the Apopago family, and as I walked in the door, Edna announced to me that we the church, we were going to build a house for this family and we were going to build it now. It didn't matter it was in the middle of the summer in Arizona but we were going to get out on that reservation and build them a house. So we did. And she was mostly a good influence even if annoying at times. As I said, she was a retired school teacher and so she never made much money especially in the time that she taught school, in the 40s' and in the 50s' probably some in the '60s, but she lived as frugally as anyone I think I have ever known. She spent very little on herself. Obviously, she bought all of her clothes at the Salvation Army store. I don't think as an adult she ever had any new clothing at all. She might have, but, she gave substantially to the church and other causes. She somehow always seemed to have money left over to help some college student that she knew with tuition at the university. This was a woman who was always alert for ways to give, and she also was

alert for ways to free others from bondage. And there's no greater example in her life of just that than with her niece Jane-- raising and mentoring her niece Jane. Now Jane, who by the time I met her, was a young adult, and she did have countless physical challenges probably due to cerebral palsy or some kind of condition, but it included her speech. You really had to work at understanding her in a conversation. It was sometimes difficult. And she had had these challenges from birth. And because she had had them from birth, some assumed that there was also something wrong with her mentally, unfortunately, including her parents.

So when Jane was small, her parents-- the father being Edna's brother, her parents were having great difficulty just trying to figure out, "What are we going to do with Jane?" and they were even embarrassed by her so that when they had company at the house, they would lock her in her room where she couldn't be heard. And they assumed that there was very little that could be done for Jane. They had no vision of what she might be or what she could do. And aunt Edna was not going to stand idly by and just observe this. In fact, she was having none of it, and she talked and talked to her brother and his family, sometimes using forceful words as I recall people telling me. And she persuaded her brother and family finally that they would let Jane come and live with her. You see, aunt Edna was absolutely convinced that there was nothing wrong with Jane's mental faculty, and therefore there was no reason she shouldn't graduate from high school, and there was no reason why she shouldn't go on and graduate from college with a degree. And there was no reason why Jane could not take her place in communities such as the church as a fully functioning member, especially the church. Edna saw in her what most people didn't see. And when Jane came to live with her as a little girl, Edna took charge. And when I say she took charge I mean she took charge. So much so she pushed Jane to succeed. She would not take from Jane whining, or resistance, or no for an answer so that Jane in later years came to affectionately refer to aunt Edna as, "Sarge. [laughter]" And you know what? Jane did graduate from college with a college degree qualified to be a teacher of Spanish. Edna had her become an agent of freedom, opening herself up to the Holy Spirit. Became an agent of freedom for Jane. She set her free from what would have been a life of bondage and she did so in spite of the resistance of many people around her. In spite of others telling her often many times, people telling her that Jane would never be able to graduate from high school, and that Jane would never be able to graduate from college, that she would never really be able to take her place as an equal in a community of people such as the church. It was futile they would tell her, and she shouldn't even try. The resistance that Edna encountered was not exactly the same as what Jesus encountered with the religious leaders of his time, but the consequences of not acting were the same. Continued bondage.

So this is what I learned from Edna, I learned a great deal. I learned some about resilience. I learned a lot about patience. I learned a lot about deep love. I learned from her that you always try to look at another human being, and sometimes we're not successful in this, but we always try to see another human being as God sees them and that you look beyond what might appear to be defining and impossible challenges. And in addition, what we learned from Edna was that we were going to fully welcome Jane as a completely functioning member and begin to lift into what we could be as a church no matter Jane's physical challenges and appearance and the awkwardness we might feel in relating to her. And I can tell you, God help us if we didn't because we would have the full force of Sarge breathing down our necks calling us to what we could be. This action on Edna's part to set Jane free, to be all she could be, it's not unlike the story of Jesus and the crippled woman.

So we are calle--I think, we are called to be alert. There may be someone you know who needs a boost or a little help in throwing off shackles that bind them. You may have to take that journey yourself. I don't know. But we're called to be alert to opportunities to welcome. To welcome, truly welcome and embrace the possibilities of someone who is different than we are. Differently-abled or someone who might be from a different culture, or race, or orientation. We're called to be agents through the Holy Spirit of God's freedom and agents of reconciliation. Amen.