

Order of Worship

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 11, 2020

WELCOME

PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP Psalm 36: 5-10 UMH p. 771

HYMN 57 *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing* AZMON

SCRIPTURE Genesis 44:1-13

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

PASTORAL PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

HYMN *In Christ, Our Liberty* ST. ANNE

SCRIPTURE Genesis 44:14-18, 24-34

MESSAGE

GENEROSITY, INVITATIONS and CELEBRATIONS

HYMN 421 *Make Me a Captive Lord* DIADEMATA

BENEDICTION

POSTLUDE

Prayer Corner

- Bernice Kohlman's former husband, Bill, passed away on October 6. Please pray for Bernice and their family and friends as they grieve.

Are You Willing to Be Set Free? Gen. 44 Pastor Rebecca Voss

Do you want to be set free? It seems like a question more suited for someone in prison or slavery. Is this relevant for us, living in the land of the free and the home of the brave? Does it apply to being free of debt, free of responsibilities, free of burdens, free of doubt, and free of fear?

One upside to the multiple downturns of 2020 is that as a society we have been forced to deal with things we had assumed we were free from. Racism is deeply ingrained and continues to cause more bondage in our country than many people realized or acknowledged. Financial inequities are causing the rich to become richer while the poor become more indebted. Many people are not at liberty to access affordable and quality healthcare. We have clearly seen we have much further to trod on the road to true freedom and liberty.

As much as I wish it were true, when the ball drops on 2020 and 2021 begins, we will not yet be truly set free. It doesn't happen when a bad year ends and new year begins. Even if the election results are exactly what we vote for, that will not set us free. Even if a vaccine is developed and broadly distributed so we don't have to wear masks or physically distance anymore, that will not set us free. Even if violence ceases, that does not indicate pervasive peace and lasting liberty. Yes, we are all called to work and move in the right direction. But as Nelson Mandela said, "As I walked out the door to the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew that if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I would still be in prison."

If we look at the idea of freedom from a Biblical point of view, we must first understand the opposite of freedom: bondage. Bondage has three literal (and many more metaphorical) examples throughout Scripture. First, the political state of a nation (such as Israel being conquered by the Babylonians or Assyrians). Second, the condition of slavery (described but never condoned). Third, the state of being imprisoned (like Joseph, Paul, John, etc.). These are in no particular order, and all share the common issue of lives that have had their autonomy taken away. This is never what God intended, but in the brokenness of our personal and societal sins, bondage is something we each have experienced and even caused for others.

The King James Version describes the nation of Egypt as “The House of Bondage” in Exodus 2 soon after the stories of Joseph end. Ex. 2:23 says, “*After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.*” (NRSV) In a literal sense, the first Israelite (we know of) to experience Egyptian bondage was Joseph. Then Joseph enslaved Simeon while he sent his brothers back with grain for their father and Benjamin. As we read today, Joseph frames his brothers to enslave Benjamin. However, their brother Judah breaks into the longest speech in the book of Genesis (chap. 44:16-34) and offers to be enslaved in the place of Benjamin. If it sounds like things are going off the rails, they are. We see the sad truth that bondage leads to more bondage. Unless we recognize and follow God’s path to true freedom.

God does two important things in order to give us freedom from bondage, and that is how we’ll find out that this train wreck is redeemable. The first thing God does is this: nothing. It is by God’s mercy that we are not immediately rescued from natural consequences of our bad choices or inaction. Sadly, there can be collateral damage to the people around, like Joseph was enslaved because of his brothers’ hatred and envy. But they were also given an unexpected gift that could set them free: they experienced a gnawing guilt that they suppressed for decades.

Guilt is not bad! It is a sign that we have a conscience and that we need to deal with some issues that are keeping us in bondage. We can’t experience forgiveness if we don’t fully recognize our need to be forgiven, both by God and those we have hurt. It is important to understand that while guilt is ultimately a gift, that shame and condemnation are not. There are key differences between guilt and shame (from within) and condemnation (from others). Guilt deals with “the whole truth and nothing but the truth” and reveals the next steps to reconciliation. Shame and condemnation twist the truth, attack a person’s humanity, and lead to hopelessness. Guilt can lead to healing, but shame and condemnation lead only to more pain.

In John 8:31-32 Jesus said, “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.*” Notice the big “if” at the beginning. It brings us back to the question today that we face, just like Joseph and his brothers faced. Do we really want to be set free? After all, truth often hurts.

Recalling another part of the Lutheran confession that I referenced last week, it begins, “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” Like addicts to sin, we can’t find freedom through wishful thinking, denial, or deflecting the truth. Like everyone who has learned the 12 steps of AA, the first step is to admit that we have a problem and that we are powerless to solve it on our own. The second step is to turn to a Power greater than ourselves (Christ our Savior) who can set us free.

If we look at the overall summary of the Biblical story, it is basically a cycle of God giving us freedom (Eden), us misusing our freedom, and God restoring us again and again. We think we know and understand everything as we eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, instead of fully trusting in God’s life and wisdom. We dehumanize and enslave others. We gratify our desires for the short term and ignore long-term consequences or opportunities to invest in future generations. As we do, we end up losing our freedom and finding ourselves in bondage.

In our passage today, Judah shines as an example of how to be set free. First, he decides to stop denying and suppressing the gift of guilt. He says to Joseph in vs. 16, “*What can we say?* (no more excuses!) *How can we clear ourselves?* (no more failure to take responsibility!) *God has found out the guilt of your servants* (no more denial!); here we are then, my lord’s slaves (ready to find freedom as God intends). The rest of the chapter is Judah’s plea for Joseph to enslave him and set his brother Benjamin free, who appeared to have stolen Joseph’s silver cup. Judah is demonstrating sacrificial love, which is God’s purpose in giving us freedom in the first place. Galatians 5:13 summarizes, *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.*

In order to be willing to be set free, we must be willing to serve God and one another with love. As Nelson Mandela said, “to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.” Judah demonstrated a willingness to freely sacrifice for the sake of his father. Jesus demonstrated a willingness to freely sacrifice for our sake. Are you willing to deal with guilt as you silence shame and condemnation? Are you willing to be set free by God? Are you willing to trust and serve God and sacrificially love people? Then you are free indeed.