

Sermon: Climbing Mount Liberty

Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans

Scripture: Psalm 118:5, Galatians 5:1, Luke 4:18

Date: October 26, 2025

We have troubles, we human beings, and how we articulate or diagnose the trouble of being human will lead us toward the solution. So if we say the human being is on some deep level broken or diseased then the solution is that the human needs to be fixed or healed. If the problem is ultimately moral waywardness then the solution is the establishing and enforcing of moral standards or laws. If the trouble is named as sinfulness infecting us then the solution is forgiveness that will save us. From a more Eastern perspective, if the human predicament is we live under the dark veil of illusion the solution then is enlightenment. If the trouble is we've been exiled from home the solution is to find the return.

This morning, as our scripture indicate, I'd like to pull on the threads of this particular way of seeing and naming our human predicament that it is fundamentally about enslavement or bondage and the solution is liberation, freedom. This is a primary framing of the human predicament in our sacred scriptures because they were written by a people who had been enslaved in their collective past in Egypt and their meeting of God in their lives was when this God secured their liberation out of love for them.

Jesus was born to this people and was formed by these stories of enslavement and liberation and it was in part how he saw the world and the problem with the human therein. He lived in a time when the Jews were no longer slaves but bound nonetheless by the Roman Empire occupying their land. And in Jesus' time those few with power and position in their civic and

religious life were shoring up their own wealth, power and position by binding the masses of people with crushing debt or exclusive laws or exploitative economic practices... sound familiar? And the liberating heart and point of the Jewish tradition was lost. Those who were already weighed down and shackled into poverty of body, mind, and spirit weren't being liberated by their faith, Jesus realized, but further exploited by it.

From the perspective of the Apostle Paul who wrote the second half of our New Testament in letters, he also wrote about how bondage or enslavement (on a soul level) was built into the Jewish religious laws which he experienced as torturous and unattainable requirements for relationship with God, until he had a mystical experience of the the resurrected Christ who liberated him from those requirements into a free and open relationship with God, full of grace, no strings attached. Amazing Grace. And this is why he speaks it in no uncertain terms - "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. So stand firm and do not let yourselves be burdened again by the yoke of slavery."

So our sacred scriptures suggests through story, teaching, poetry, history, that the human being is essentially enslaved or bound and God wants our liberation, our freedom. Though we live in a country that prides itself on being a land of freedom, the human predicament remains within us as the root problem whether we are free to say whatever awful thing we want to say or carry our guns around with us in public, we are bound inside and out in multivarious ways and God wants our liberation and Jesus' Holy Spirit is at work in this world wherever true freedom - internally and externally, psychologically and systematically - is being forged.

But here's the thing, freedom framed with a belief in a Creator God who loves and is at work in this world is a different thing from freedom as

framed in a modern individualistic way as merely “I am free to do whatever I want as long as it doesn’t infringe on anyone else” sort of freedom. Because we believe in a God of Truth, our freedom, as God’s creatures, necessarily involves honesty. Dishonesty hampers our freedom and flourishing. And because we believe in a Creator God who pronounces all creation good and who was enfleshed in - of all forms - a poor refugee in occupied territory, our freedom necessarily involves our care and responsibility to others and God’s good earth itself. Exploitation of others and the earth hampers our freedom and flourishing. And because we believe in a God of grace, we are most free when we are giving grace to others around us rather than judging, condemning, and being in rivalry with them. In so far as rivalry is what’s in our hearts, we are bound and enslaved into a lesser way of being human. We are not free. And because we believe in a God who sacrificed Godself in and through Jesus on the cross for the sake of others, we come to know our freedom in and through humility and a willingness to sacrifice at times our good for the sake of others’ good. The parable of the Humble tax collector facing his own despairing account of his sin-sick soul is on the road to liberation while the arrogant religious authority turned in on himself and arrogantly condemning the other is the image of one enslaved to the things of the ego that lead not to his flourishing but his diminishing. Because we believe in a God of love, our freedom is bound to love and in so far as we have not love, we have not freedom as our spirits and souls and societies so desperately need it.

The reason I am lifting up this theme of freedom is because it felt as though the Spirit gave it to me on the last day of my 3.5 month sabbatical, a couple weeks ago, to help me pull together the various strands of my sabbatical experience. I drove up to New Hampshire on my closing day to

do one of my favorite hikes which was the Franconia Ridge hike. As I drove up there, a pick up truck came flying by me with a huge American flag whipping out from one side of the truck bed and a white flag whipping out on the other side with the word FREEDOM. And then for some reason my GPS directed me to the parking lot of a different hike about 5 miles from the trail head of the Franconia Ridge one and since the parking lots were getting full up there I said, what the heck I'll take this hike and it happened to be Mount Liberty. Not the easiest hike I've done, pretty much straight up but BEAUTIFUL! Mount Liberty. And at one point as I was huffing and puffing up that mountain and talking to God and myself I began thinking about liberty in general and what binds us and what true liberation looks like, so different in many ways than all the discourse on the topic.

And it helped me frame in my own mind what at least a part of Tracy and my Hildegard Pilgrimage was about for us - this 10-day walk through the German countryside and forests, villages and vineyards, where for 90 beautiful miles and 10 days we simply had to follow these signs that were on trees and posts and fences and that was it. Just follow and fully trust German diligence that they would get us to the next place for us to stay by the end of our day. That was it. Follow the signs and we did so in silence at times and chatting occasionally, a lot of oohing and awwing over the landscape, some singing together and joyful leaping and follow the signs. And there was something remarkably liberating and freeing about that simplicity of purpose... just get on the path and walk, keep on the pilgrimage day in and day out and be brought to where we belonged.

I'm not saying we can live in that clarity and simplicity of purpose all the time and it sure helps to have been given the great gift and privilege of a paid sabbatical for time away to do a walk like that. But what I'm thinking I

can, we can, work on is leaning into our trust in God to lead us a little more, so that our lives are becoming a little freer from all the various ways we are bound. The path to true freedom is the way of trust in a Higher Power than ourselves. In the wisdom book of Proverbs it is written “trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not upon your own understanding but in all your ways acknowledge God and God will direct your paths.”

We don't believe in a God who controls us like a Puppet Master nor gives us things like a big Santa Clause in the sky but we DO believe in a God that directs our paths and we must believe that the paths that we will be directed upon, if we look for the signs and listen for God's voice and tend to the promptings of the Spirit, are paths towards greater freedom and paths that align us better to the liberating work of God for the sake of the world as well. So we look for the signs of God's guidance and take the next best step we know how, along the way to mount liberty.

And I can't talk about bondage and liberation without also mentioning that before we went to Germany for the pilgrimage, Tracy and I went to Normandy and stayed in this gorgeous in-process-of-being-renovated monastery in Longues-sur-Mer right in the middle of where one of the most consequential moments in US history and the History of the West occurred, as the Allies liberated France from Nazi forces in WWII. It is such a beautiful area but also remarkable to stand on those beaches, go to those museums, and walk through the graveyards of the thousands and thousands of soldiers who died in an effort to liberate a people and a region which had fallen into the bondage of the Nazis. There's 2 things I'll try to say quickly about this before I close.

I honestly did not know as much as I thought I did about exactly how that invasion took place and I was blown away by the sheer brilliance of

human ingenuity that made that invasion a success - the number of forces and plans coordinated, the building of a massive harbor, the courage it all took. It's amazing the damage that can be done, as witnessed in what the Nazi's did, and it's amazing the good that can be accomplished when the human decides to confront bondage and evil. Secondly, those soldiers buried in those graves and all those who willingly sacrificed their lives for what they believed was good and right, are examples for us not only of the importance of freedom but the sacrifice that is often required in advancing it. We are made free by a liberating God to freely give of our lives for the sake of others. We are not free to make of our lives what we want... at least not if we want to know freedom. Built into our existence by a God of love is the necessity to give of our lives for the good of others and that is the way to freedom. That quiet cemetery of rows upon rows upon rows of crosses and Stars of David bears witness to the gift and importance and the cost of freedom. I'm not so sure warfare and such violence is aligned to God's purposes but that's another conversation and their witness that connects sacrifice with freedom is what I want to honor and note.

What must we be willing to give up to walk the way of liberation and freedom and ensure that for others? Can we trust God and look for the signs that will lead us down the pilgrimage of life towards deeper and true freedom? Where are we bound and what is the way of liberation for us? Where are others bound and how can we be allies in their need for liberation? To trust in signs from God is a part of it and being willing to act and offer ourselves when the pathway clears and the call comes. May we as a church consider ways that we can corporately walk the journey of freedom and participate in the process of liberating God's people and God's creation. In the name of the God who freely creates, the Son who freely

gives of himself and the Spirit who is drawing all of history toward a liberating end through an amazing grace!