

## Sermon on Liberation 6/25/23

When I was in seminary the most shocking words I heard my favorite professor say were: “Religion is meant to lead to liberation.”

As someone whose father was a conservative and maybe even fundamentalist Christian, I had experienced how Christianity can be more dominating than freeing. He was more concerned with saving souls and condemning others than seeking liberation. It seems that many of our Christian siblings are more tied up in knots over new ways to oppress others than free them. In actuality, we see a great deal of tyranny in our fellow Christians who seek to ban books and ban people who they disapprove of based on our shared scriptures. Much of the Christianity of today is the opposite of liberating it is a sledgehammer of judgment aimed at our LGBTQ+ family. Sometimes I wonder if more bad has been done in the name of Jesus Christ than good.

How is it that we can read the same sacred text and some of us are inspired to limit freedom and some of us are committed to fight for freedom? But this question, while important, is for another day.

What I would like to ask today is, what is it to be liberated? Are we liberated?

According to today’s gospel Jesus wants his disciples to be free of fear. Jesus sent his disciples out with no illusion that this was anything but a dangerous mission. In fact, he says it is like sending out lambs among wolves. He has given them the power to heal and cast out demons and told them to take no staff and not even wear sandals. He is asking them to rely completely on God. Jesus tells his disciples not to fear those who will malign you, to even have no fear even of those who kill the body but rather to fear the one who can kill the soul. But the one who holds this power is merciful and even knows how many hairs are on your head. It is a lot to ask – isn’t it?

And there is a cost to this discipleship. This is no casual commitment – to follow the one who asks us to put him first – to put our faith in God alone – we are to go all in. Jesus warns of the consequences, even becoming enemies with our families. Then to crown this difficult passage from Matthew off, Jesus tells us that he didn’t come to bring peace to the earth but a sword.

A sword. Maybe it is a sword of justice for those who are vulnerable. Maybe it is a sword of intolerance for those who dominate and oppress others? Maybe it is a sword of truth against lies?

As some of you know I facilitate a program in the California Men’s Colony. It is not religious, but it is certainly liberating. This program was developed by former lifers who created a curriculum focused on self-reflection and accountability. I sit in a circle with twenty men, and we share our stories. Yesterday we shared stories from our childhoods. It was heart-breaking. The level of horror and suffering these men have endured is honestly, staggering. Many men said they had scars on their backs to this day from beatings at the hand of parents. Most

childhoods were in poverty and addiction. Most of the stories are not repeatable as I would risk inflicting secondhand trauma on others. It feels immensely unfair that some of God's family, especially our BIPOC siblings, are born into such suffering.

Many of these men have been doing time for 20-30 years. They have undergone another kind of hell behind bars. But many of them have found a deep and sustaining faith while inside. Their faith is a life-or-death kind of faith. Not a Sunday only kind of faith. It is what will save them in a real way – it offers them a path of healing and transformation. Their love of God is embedded deep in their being. They see God working in their lives and guiding them towards a better version of themselves.

I am awed not only by what these men have endured but how deeply they long to be better men. They come to this group because they have heard it is the real deal, and they go deep to touch the emotions that will open their numb hearts. They are ready to show up and speak those things that have been buried inside with utter courage knowing that this is the path to liberation.

Jesus asks us for this level of metanoia or transformation. To risk everything – to be all in, and to not be concerned with the repercussions.

Imagine a world where all religions brought about liberation. Where we are all free to live into our fullest potential. Where we are free of fear, free of oppression, free of all domination systems, free to love and express ourselves just as we are. Imagine living in a world that celebrates differences and reveres the interconnectedness of all beings; and a world that treats the earth with respect.

I want to live in this image of the kin-dom of God. I want to co-create a liberated world where we feel loved and cared for just as we are. Let us support one another in the truth that we are made in the image of God, beloved and free. Let us imagine this world together and let us begin now.