

In Whose Liberation Do We Participate?

The unfailing Love of God persistently weaves us together as community through our longer and newer connections. On this sixteenth of twenty-five Sundays in the long green growing season of Ordinary Time, as People's Park embraces us in sacred time and space, let's wonder together: In whose liberation do we participate?

Let's begin with prayer: O God grant to each of us and to this community of faith: serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

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- *"the act of setting someone free from imprisonment, slavery, or oppression"*
- *"release"* and
- *"freedom from limits on thought or behavior"*

I'll read those again – *Oxford Languages* definitions of liberation:

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- *"release"* and
- *"freedom from limits on thought or behavior"*

Being set free, release, freedom from limits. In whose liberation DO we participate? I invite us to wonder about liberation both for another and for ourselves.

Lilla Watson – Aboriginal elder, activist and educator from Queensland, Australia and a supporter of the International Women's Network – has been credited with these words:

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Here is the purpose of the International Women’s Network: *“Although there are many women’s networks operating at the global level, particularly connected to UN structures,”* they write, *“there is a need to develop partnerships with women’s organizations that focus on building stronger links in the struggle for tackling issues such as trafficking, violence against women, and other violations of women’s human rights...”*

I learned that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, as Watson’s family became involved with Aboriginal-led organizations; white neighbors were also becoming more aware of racism, colonialism, and the ongoing effects of both. The International Women’s Network shares this context for Watson’s now famous words. They write, *“Many Australians came to the emerging Aboriginal and Islander organizations asking ‘How can I help? What do Aboriginal people want?’ Lilla Watson and other members of her family got involved with such organizations after moving from their Gangulu country on the Dawson River in 1965. They, like others, felt frustrated by those questions. They could not, and would not tell white people what to do: and saw reflections of persisting colonial perceptions and attitudes in their offers of help. They needed help to liberate themselves from these: and so the challenge: ‘If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. If you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.’”*

Humans need liberation from a variety of forms of oppression and unhealthy limits (whether imposed by another or oneself). Let’s consider the story of the Israelites escaping from enslavement by the Egyptian Pharaoh’s army. These words ushered us into the portion of the story that we heard today:

“As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back and saw the Egyptians pursuing them, and cried out in terror to God. They turned on Moses...” It feels important to pause and acknowledge that some of us have experienced terror in the midst of being pursued in some way by a violent oppressor. And others of us have not experienced terror in that way.

The voice of Love (the voice of God) told Moses that God would be glorified when the violent pursuit by the oppressors came to an end. And, indeed, we heard, *“When Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore and beheld the great power that God had shown against them, the people held God in awe; and put their faith in God and in Moses, God’s trusted servant.”*

Jewish and Christian people have now been retelling this mythical ancestral story of the Exodus for millennia. Oppressed people groups and their allies often draw upon this story to inspire their courage in the struggle toward liberation. For people of many walks of life, this story helps us make spiritual sense of times when we are overwhelmed by the relief that comes with liberation or release. The providential power of God’s liberating love is many-storied.

This story has also been abused to construct false dichotomies in which God’s providence is for us (whoever the “us” is) and not for our enemy. Bob Dylan points to this false dichotomy in his 1963 song, “With God on Our Side.”

In 2007, singer songwriter Bryan Sirchio published a song entitled “Jesus Was Not an American.” Within that song, he relates a wise Jewish interpretation of the Exodus story that always brings me to my knees. The lyrics go like this:

*“There’s a tale Hasidic rabbis sometimes tell
About that day when Moses parted the Red Sea
The day that thousands of Egyptian soldiers drowned
As the Hebrews all escaped from slavery
And they say that all the angels in the heavens
Broke out in celebration, they danced and laughed and cheered
But then one of the angels stopped and asked Archangel Michael
‘Why is God not celebrating with us here?’
Then Michael said, ‘God is not here with us...
God’s in way too much grief to celebrate
In fact God’s heart is broken, and God’s alone now weeping tears
‘Cause thousands of God’s Egyptian children drowned today’”*

The heart of God is grieved by any violence. We need not let the oppressive Egyptian army of the hook for the violence they perpetrated. We need to recognize the cyclical nature of violence. Once embedded and normalized, violent behavior seems to repeat itself and ripple outward to affect many (including perpetrators) until the cycle is broken.

As a segue between the Exodus story and the very different (but not TOO different) story of Jesus’ parable about forgiveness of debts, I invite us to consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which has had many powerful effects on the ways people think about human psychology in some circles.

I wish that the hierarchical pyramid was a bit more in the shape of a circle because I do think it might be cyclical in nature

- At the bottom are our **physiological** needs (food, clothing, shelter, sleep, air)
- Then comes **safety** (personal security, employment, health, resources)

- Above physiological and safety, then one can pursue health and life in a category of **love and belonging** (friendship, intimacy, family, sense of connection)
- After physiological, safety, love and belonging, comes **esteem** (respect, self-esteem, recognition, freedom)
- And above physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, comes **self-actualization** (becoming the most that one can be in their lifetime)

Interesting how self-actualization may help us to find liberation for ourselves and others in times of physiological need as well.

Where does your need for liberation (for release) fit within those psychological concepts. Do you have a need to become unstuck in some area of esteem (self-esteem or respect shared with others)? In some aspect of human connection (love and belonging)? Or do you have a personal safety need that is not being met? Or even a physiological need at the foundation?

We heard the story of a ruler, one of his royal officials for whom he forgave a debt, and a colleague of that royal official who did not forgive a debt. Like the royal official who withheld forgiveness from a colleague, we sometimes withhold forgiveness and release in relationship with another or with our own self instead of letting grace infuse all of our movements.

I invite you to look at the cover of our worship bulletin. And I'd like to lead us in a moment of contemplation for ourselves. I invite you to imagine holding (as those hands must have been holding the bird that is taking flight again) some situation in your life in which you feel stuck or are in need of some kind of release, unsticking and liberation.

If you're comfortable doing so, you might close your eyes as you hold that situation in your life that needs some unsticking – that needs grace and forgiveness to infuse it. And I invite you to hear these words from a song called “Unfailing Love” by Richard Bruxvoort Colligan. Let these words speak to your situation:

*“Tried so hard to cover it up,
avoiding the truth, pretending to be strong.
Turns out God can cover it all.
There's no need to hide when everything's gone wrong.
Come and begin again, come and begin again.
Unfailing love forgives it all;
unfailing love, a brand new start;
no matter what, we trust in God's unfailing love.”*

Open your eyes if you wish. **Friends, our own liberation relies on us staying still sometimes and sitting in the discomfort of recognition of our stuckness and letting God's love simply wash over us before we attempt to move** – before we attempt to problem solve.

But what do you need in case you were to step out in courage and release a bit of the stuckness in the situation you're facing? Again, it could be anywhere in your life. It could be in relation with another or it could be an internal struggle. But what will it take from within you and from those who love you to help you unstuck?

I want to offer a few more words as closing to this time of thinking about liberation and how we are bound up together. So I invite you again to close your eyes and really sit with that situation. And if you're not coming up with one for yourself, then think of someone who is hurting in your circle of loved ones. Is there a way in which they are stuck and you are longing for their liberation – for their release?

During these closing words, feel that burden in your hands, but if there's a way of unclenching and releasing it, then do so – letting love we can count on coming through ourselves and others to infuse that. So we close with these words from a song called "Step Out in Faith." And let it be with your situation for yourself or a loved one:

*"I see the way of Jesus I'm the safety of my boat
If I jump into the water will I sink or will I float?
Sometimes my path of faith has mountains in the way
And when I want to speak the truth, I don't know what to say
When fears hold us back, Jesus says, 'don't be afraid'
When doubts hold us back, Jesus says, 'come, step out in faith'
Get out of the boat
The mountains will move
The waters will hold
The wind and waves of doubt are no match for Jesus' ways
Step out, step out, step out, step out in faith."
(Terry Krieger and Richard Bruxvoort Colligan)*

Friends, let us be courageous. We need release and everyone else alongside us needs release as well. Let us be bound together, because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Exodus 14: 10-31, Matthew 18: 21-35