

“Until you discover your inner freedom, all of life will seem to imprison you. And when you are free inside yourself, no outer prison walls can contain your love and peace.” Gangaji

Sermon Title, “What does it Mean to be Free?”

Scripture Lesson John 8:28-33

The Quote that you see at the top of the bulletin arrived in my email inbox a few weeks ago, and not having settled on my sermon topic to that point, I decided quickly that this was the theme I wanted to speak about today. *“Until you discover your inner freedom, all of life will seem to imprison you. And when you are free inside yourself, no outer prison walls can contain your love and peace.”*

Freedom means an awful lot of things for people, everything from what is enshrined in our Bill of Rights... you know *freedom of religion, speech, press, assembly, and petition, the right to bear arms*, etc. to others it means the freedom to live as we chose, and in the manner in which we chose, as long as we don't tread on the rights of others, I would add. And, some people think that freedom isn't free at all and that we have to fight and win wars to garner it. So, there's lots of ways of understanding what freedom means.

The quote, however, suggests that freedom is an inside game, and that it's really not about externals at all.

The quote, comes from a spiritual teacher named Gangaji, with whom I have been privileged to be on retreat with, and also sat in satsang with on several occasions. Her teachings and writings have made a huge impact in my life. She teaches in the non-dualistic tradition and her words apply equally to folks of all religious traditions, as well as to those who have none (In passing, I also will mention that she has been the teacher of my wife Noris for over 30 years.) Finally, the Gangaji Foundation runs a very effective prison outreach program. It is likely in that context that these words of hers sprang forth.

Having decided on the theme I wanted to address, my mind immediately went to the passage in the Gospel of John, which was just read by Janet. Notice at the close of the passage the question posed to Jesus, by his Jewish audience: "What do you mean by saying '*You will be made free?*'" Thus my sermon title "*What does it Mean to be Free?*"

Before delving deeper into this question, let's set a little context. Just a verse earlier is the very famous line, which I presume everyone here has heard of, or even spoken at some time in your life. "The truth will make you free." Or

perhaps you've heard it as "*The Truth will Set you Free.*" A smaller number of you are likely to recall the words just before this quote, which are, "*and you will know the truth and the truth will make (or set) you free.*" So strictly on the face of it, Jesus, at least according to the author of this gospel, equates being free to knowing the truth. Which to my mind immediately begs the question, *Well, what truth do you have to know in order to be free?*

Are you with me so far? Or have I already lost you?

Now, according to a sizable number of people within the larger group of the millions around the world today who identify themselves as Christians, the truth that you have to know in order to be free comes through believing and following Jesus. And there are other passages in the Gospel according to John to support this belief. For example chapter 14, verse 6 are found these words attributed to Jesus, "*I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father (aka God) but through me.*" This passage, along with a correlary passage in an earlier chapter of John, which several of you can probably quote from memory, "*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life,*" are pretty much the bedrock beliefs of conservative, Evangelical, and Fundamentalist Christianity. And they believe

without question that this is the truth you have to know in order to be free, that the way of salvation and true freedom is through Jesus Christ alone.

I don't doubt that throughout history, from the earliest days of the Christian community down to the present day, that there are legions of people who have found freedom in believing these words and doing their best to follow the way of Jesus. Yet I have also known or observed an awful lot of people who believe these things, or at least claim to believe them, but who live lives that appear to me to be anything but free, and I will go so far as to say they are not particularly interested in allowing others to live freely either, except on their own terms.

Conversely, I have known people who don't confess any belief in Jesus at all, other than perhaps that he was an historical and very admirable person whose teachings are worthy of respect and even emulation. These people, I am referring to live very freely, and happily too, I might add. They testify to feeling complete and are unconcerned about the here after, and they appear to feel very comfortable within the framework of a *live, and let live*, approach to life.

How do we account for these divergent ways of perceiving truth?

First, I want to acknowledge here that I have walked very squarely inside the evangelical world to the point that I happily espoused the passages I quoted from moments ago and I even spent a number of years trying to convince others that the way to true freedom was to believe these passages just as I did.

And now, as I have attested to more than once from behind this pulpit, my thinking and my beliefs have shifted dramatically from those early considerations. In fact, I could almost divide my life span in half, with the first 30-or-so years of my life deeply steeped in this earlier belief system and the last 30-plus years, first gradually and then ultimately completely stepping away from these beliefs for myself. Yet, as I mentioned a bit ago, I do think that people can find true freedom and happiness in believing in Jesus as their personal savior, in fact I am related to some of these folks, but I hasten to add that I no longer think that one has to believe these things in order to be both free and happy, and I will also add at peace within oneself.

So what it is that constitutes true freedom?

I wonder this morning if you accept the premise, that as Jesus supposedly taught, that it is indeed the truth that sets us free? To get at this question a bit more reflectively, I think we can safely agree that untruths do not set us free. And

just to put a finer point on this thought, *have you ever told a lie to someone or done something dishonest?* Let me ask you, *Did it make you feel free inside?* I would suppose not, at least it hasn't worked that way for me. But to say that truth sets us free is to say something else again. Especially in this day in time, when it seems that truth is up for grabs.

On this point, I was very tempted this morning to talk about the current political climate in this country and about so-called fake news, and to ridicule the notion of alternative facts and trumped-up data (no pun intended). But to do so would be to sidetrack us from the point of what truth really means. And, further it would suggest, inaccurately that we can equate truth with believing a set of facts, whether proven or not, that happen to fit within our own belief systems.

But, the truth that Jesus was talking about runs much deeper than mere facts, important as they are. Facts of science or history or nature do not make us free nor does believing them, or not believing them. Unless we inquire deeply into the nature of truth we can get confused thinking that truth is all about what we know or what we think we know. But the truth that sets us free as I said, runs deeper than that.

Consider again the words of Gangaji, which describe true freedom as an inside job and not based upon any belief system. Now this idea or teaching isn't original to her by any means, two thousand years ago Jesus was reported to have said that the Kingdom (or realm) of God lies within. Before him one of the authors of Proverbs said, "**as a person thinks in his or her heart so is he or she.**" Around the same time in history the Buddha was recorded to have said "**We are shaped by our thoughts; we become what we think. When the mind is pure, joy follows like a shadow that never leaves.**" I would say that all true spiritual teachers understand this, that freedom comes from within.

Far too often, however, the human experience has us trapped inside our own prisons: The prisons of judgmentalism, negativism, fearfulness, self-righteousness, or egotism and it's opposite, the embrace of poor self-esteem.

By saying this I don't mean to make light of those behind bars, whether they are the physical bars of a jail cell, or the mental bars of depression, or the dehumanizing bars of poverty, oppression and injustice, but I know that despite outward circumstances of any nature, that true freedom is possible for all of us. Isn't this what Nelson Mandela discovered behind the bars of his South African prison cell, and Ellie Wiesel in a Nazi concentration camp, and the apostle Paul in

a Philippian jail cell, and Theresa of Avila behind the cloisterd walls of a Carmelite convent?

But how do we ourselves know if we are walking in truth, the kind of truth that sets us free regarless of our outward circumstances?

Not surprisingly, the key that unlocks the prison doors that we construct is love. **Love, Truth and Freedom are all of a piece.** When you truly love without attachment to the results you are living in truth and **this is the truth that sets us free**. This love is not confined to any religion, creed, race, sexual idenity, nationality, political party, belief system or national boundry, it certainly isn't the sole possesion of either Evangelical Christianity or Liberal Christianity.

To conclude my remarks I would like to read one of the poems that was read at the rehearsal dinner honoring May and Dave's love for each other and, if I may say as a proud father, observing May and Dave's relationship, they appear very free with each other and so they naturally give each other the freedom to be who each one is, and I couldn't be happier for them. The poem I refer to is called **Touched by an Angel**, written by another spiritual teacher for many, Maya Angelou.

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see
that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.

It is only love that sets us free.

AMEN

Freedom in Prison

Grace is Here Too.

For more than 20 years, I have been speaking with people from all walks of life: good people, bad people, enlightened people, unenlightened people. I speak to people who have the privilege of freedom and relative control over their lives, and I speak to people in prison. One life is a kind of heaven and the other a kind of hell. And yet both in heaven and hell -- the extremes of our experience -- there are the same questions: Who am I? What are we here for? Where is grace?

I recall one particular visit to Folsom Prison several years ago. The men I spoke with had not lived privileged lives. Most often they had lived hard early lives and perpetuated that hardness into adulthood. In prison they had come to a place of disillusionment, where they were willing to look at something they had not understood before. Essentially, they were willing to stop living their lives the way they had lived them.

Prison is a very hard place to live. You might think it absurd to go into a place like Folsom Prison and talk to the men about vulnerability and opening, but that is what they hungered to hear. There were 45 men present that day. In a prison population of about 3,000 that is a small percentage. But this small percentage really wanted the truth, and they were capable of hearing the truth regardless of what they had done or how they had lived. Because of their willingness to deeply inquire, they could find the freedom and peace that had never left them. They could hear the call of their innocent hearts. They, like you, were not only capable of hearing the call of the heart, but of surrendering to it.

How has it affected their lives? I don't know. I know for sure there were several who heard and experienced the living truth of conscious peace, at least for a moment. They saw themselves and

were seen as who they truly are, not by what they had done or how they had identified themselves. That is profound relief. That is the taste of freedom. It is an experience of love.

We all experience certain kinds of prisons. Our prison may not be as materially rough as that of the men living in Folsom Prison, but given the nature of the human mind, there can be wrenching suffering even if you aren't in a physical prison. Without demeaning or glorifying your own prison, you can inquire directly into the experience of suffering and discover freshly what lives in the core.

Maybe it is easier for those in prison than it is for many of us. It is so obvious to them that their lives have failed. However, they thought they would succeed, they failed. However much you think you have failed, in significant ways your life has been a success. The very fact that you are free in this moment means that you have succeeded, and success itself can give rise to bondage. The trap of success is in identifying with privilege and entitlement.

In success, you can go to sleep and dream yourself to be special, or you can take advantage of your time and privilege and really inquire into the deepest part of yourself. You can open your mind to see what is here inside you, just as the men in Folsom Prison did.

The prisoners in Folsom hadn't been taught what they would find in inquiry. They weren't prejudiced. They didn't know that they would find peace and love and oneness. They were innocently surprised and amazed. Several of them cried.

My dilemma in speaking to those who are not in prison is that often they already know too much. It is the trap of the spiritual adept -- the successful seeker. So, let us suspend what we know. Let us not know the correct answer. With a willingness to investigate in an open way, for the first time, we can freshly discover that grace is here.

We can each discover what lives freely, both inside and outside. We can recognize what is at peace, regardless of circumstances. We can find ourselves in all.

For example, we have rather huge swaths of people in our country who believe different truths today, and, if not exactly truths, then certainly a different set of facts, which is on the face of it, a rather ridiculous notion. How can there be different facts about the same data, or the same measurements? I mean either

the earth revolves around the Sun, or it doesn't, either the universe is expanding, or it isn't, either the planet is heating up or it is not, and either humans are causing it to heat up, or they are not, just to mention a few items that we could call facts. Now, on this latter point the American people are still divided, in numbers I imagine that are roughly equivalent to those who support our current president, and those who do not. But the scientific community is not divided on the question, unless you think that the 3% of climate scientists who don't attribute global warming to human activity is a fair division against the 97% who do. And yet our current national policy is being determined by the 3% in this country which I believe we still call a democracy.

We are living in very fascinating times, are we not?

If our current political climate does nothing else for those of us who care about truth and whether or not it sets us free, at the very least, we ought to be asking ourselves, does it really make in any difference whether we live by truth or we don't? I happen to think that it makes all the difference in the world and for the world, I might add.