

“BREAKING FREE”

Isaiah 49:8-16

This is Memorial Day weekend when we celebrate the sacrifices of soldiers who have worked hard and died to protect our freedom. In every country there is a celebration of this kind because freedom and sovereignty are what make a country independent. We, as Americans, put a high value on freedom because of our history and our struggle for independence and then our struggle against slavery. Liberty is one of the basic tenets of our American life. The Declaration of Independence of our country states very clearly that freedom is one of those rights that we hold as a fundamental value of life. But what does it really mean to live a life of freedom? And do we truly live as free people?

A recent study of our country showed that the fastest growing residential communities in the nation are private developments created out of fear of crime and urban chaos. And these communities have strict rules and regulations about the color of your house, the decorations you put up, the satellite dish location, street-side parking, the height and color of your fence, the type of gardens or flower beds, the number and size of hanging planters for the front porch, and so forth. So, as Americans, we seem to be willing to give up a great deal of our freedom in order to be safe. The same is true when it comes to our national security. The days of complete airport access are long gone when we used to be able to greet someone just as they got off their plane. Wire-tapping and torture are things that we have allowed our government to use for the sake of our national security. So, how do we measure our freedom? How do we know when we are living free or in a prison? What are the things that imprison us? The funny thing about our freedom is that most of our lives feel so restricted and so lacking of freedom.

It happened in a prison! It always happens in a prison! His body was falling apart and nothing was working as it used to! His body had become a prison of pain and despair. There was no release in sight because he did not have a terminal illness. It was just old age and he was missing his life the way he knew it. He missed his wife and his old friends and all of it seemed like a dream that never even happened.

It happened in a prison! It always happens in a prison! This was the prison of the rubble of their home when a 7.9-magnitude earthquake hit their country on May 12. Buried teenagers struggled to break free from the rubble, while others were crying out for help. Families waited in the rain near the wreckage as rescuers wrote the names of the dead on a blackboard. The magnitude of the disaster is beyond anyone's comprehension and those who were hit the hardest were mostly the poor. How will they ever find healing and restoration?

It happened in a prison! It always happens in a prison! This is the prison of exile for the people of Israel. According to our reading today, the people have lost hope. They have been imprisoned in their exile in Babylon for almost 50 years. They were humiliated before their enemies. Their land was taken away from them. The temple in Jerusalem was destroyed. Their cities were taken over by strangers. Their sense of blessing and hope was taken away from them. They even felt that God was punishing them. The first 40 chapters in the book of Isaiah talk about the people's struggles in exile and away from their homeland and their worship center in Jerusalem. Yet, as things got to their darkest point and as the prison of their exile seemed to be like a permanent reality, the words of the prophet Isaiah came with tremendous hope declaring the liberating power of God's love. And indeed, the people of Israel were finally freed and were able to go back to their homeland and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The power of God's hope and love could not be restricted even after 50 years of occupation and refugee life.

Yet, as they went back to their homeland, the people learned about a deeper source of freedom and blessing. Their hope and freedom in life didn't come only in the form of their physical return to the land, they were able to connect with their deep sense of God's love, justice and freedom. For a long time, the people of Israel felt that God forgot about them, but here we have these words from the prophet showing us how God never forgets about us. The amazing description of God being like a nursing mother who does not forget her child gives us a vivid image of the depth of God's care for the people. Even if a nursing mother mentally forgot about her child, her physical connection is something that cannot be overlooked. Also, the image of being inscribed into the palm of God's hand is another physical description of how deeply we are connected to God. This is not a temporary tattoo that goes away after it is washed. It is a permanent inscription that is there to stay.

This freedom that we have through God's care and love is not limited to our human rights or life circumstances. It is a deeper freedom that cannot be taken away from us. It is a freedom that helps us move beyond our selfish concerns about our own benefits to participate in God's love and justice for the whole world. In verse 9 we hear about the hope of God for the prisoners to be liberated in this new experience of return from exile. Since in the ancient world (as is the case in our world today) prisoners were mostly the poor and the marginalized, we see that part of Israel's new freedom is to be against every practice that imprisons others. The call of hope and freedom comes to us so that we can no longer live complacent when we see others living in prison. So, the community of God who is liberated and redeemed by God's love, is also liberated to love and liberate others. Hope comes to us from God's liberating love. In the covenant of God's care, we know that we will never be forgotten.

The story is told about a test that was given at Harvard Divinity School. It could be at any divinity school but this test was at Harvard. It was a very clever test. Now, when you go to Harvard, you have to be smart, and these smart theological students took a course entitled, "Christians and Society." The professor had created a test that was three hours long. It was a tough test on the subject, "Being a Moral Christian in An Immoral Society." Half way through the test, he arranged for a ten-minute break. The students were to leave the room for ten minutes, get fresh air, and then come back and take the last hour and a half of the test. The students were writing as fast and furiously as they could, writing down all their knowledge of morality, what does it mean to be a moral person in an immoral society. But now it was break time and the students went out into the courtyard, where there was iced tea and cookies. Out there in the courtyard was another part of the test, although the students didn't know it. This was the real test. There was a man, all beaten up, there in the courtyard. He was there, and the students looked at him and drank their tea and ate their cookies and said to themselves, "What should we do? We have this test to take." All the students went back into the classroom to finish the written part of the test. The professor flunked them all. They were too imprisoned by fear of failure and self preservation that they were not free to love and care for the man in need.

Most of us live in our own little prisons of self doubt, guilt, greed and exploitation. These prisons are whatever locks us out of love's reach. The call of the prophet in Isaiah 49 is for us today to claim for ourselves the promise and power of God's liberating love. Even in those times of despair when all hope seems beyond our reach, we are to remember that we are inscribed on God's own palm and that our inner freedom is something that cannot be taken away. So, today, I invite you to look at the Faith in Action piece in your bulletin and to pray before God to help you with those areas or experiences that might be holding you back from having love in your life. What is binding you now? What is putting you in despair? What are your resources to be freed from what binds you? Are we free to love? Are we free to be loved? What are the things that hinder our world and shut it out of love? What can I do about it? What is my prayer for healing for myself? What is my prayer/action for healing for the world?

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, theologian and teacher, once wrote about his experience of being liberated by God's grace and love to see his deep connection to others, "In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream... [We] are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.... I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun."

A few years ago, I went to a retreat called "Sabbath" in a beautiful monastery in San Diego. The setting was amazingly beautiful with flowers, trees and the ocean. I was very excited about the five days I was going to spend down there. But, on our first evening together, our leader informed us that every day we were going to be silent from the time we wake up till 1:00 p.m. We were not even supposed to smile at each other. We were

supposed to totally focus on our inner life without any outside interactions. Even for breakfast, we would just eat in silence. My heart sank! How can I possibly be with all these people that I am so excited to get to know without even saying a word to them? I thought that they should have warned those of us who are extroverted that this was a major discomfort zone! After two days of being completely silent each morning, I started to discover an inner freedom that I never knew existed before. I even began to enjoy the silence and did not really care for the talking part of the day. And even when I talked to people after the silent part of the day, our conversations felt real and were not about the common superficial stuff of daily life. For the first time in my life, I had this experience of freedom of not having to explain who I am professionally or anything else for that matter. I could just be present without any human limitations of being defined as a woman, a pastor, a mother, a sister, a Christian, or anything else. That was the first time I got to know the freedom of being connected to my soul and ultimately to God. From that experience on, my life has never been the same.

Most of life happens in a prison! But we don't always have to be in a prison! We are free because God has freed us through the power of love. God's love and grace can redeem and liberate us to live as freed people who know that true freedom comes from our ability to be free to live a life of giving and receiving love.

FAITH IN ACTION

[5/25/08]

The words of Psalm 46, "Be still and know that I am God," give us a focus for our lives. We are invited to let go of our struggles, whether they are mental, physical or relational, in order to be in the stillness and peace of God's presence. Yet, our fears and anxieties often haunt us, preventing us from being fully present to God. In his book, "*The Power of Now*", Eckhart Tolle teaches about the value of learning to live in the present moment. Most of us struggle because we are either dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Trusting in God's care, we can learn to relax into our being wherever we are and whatever we are doing. "Enlightenment is not only the end of suffering and of continuous conflict within and without, but also the end of dreadful enslavement to incessant thinking... In the enlightened state, you still use your thinking mind when needed, but in a much more focused and effective way than before. You use it mostly for practical purposes, but you are free of the involuntary internal dialogue, and there is inner stillness." Eckhart Tolle

Some practical points from "*The Power of Now*" for being still and knowing God's presence in every moment:

1. End the delusion of time: Time isn't precious at all, because it is an illusion. What you perceive as precious is...the one point that is out of time: the Now.
2. Make it your practice to withdraw attention from past and future: Nothing ever happened in the past; it happened in the Now. Nothing will ever happen in the future; it will happen in the Now.
3. Give your fullest attention to whatever the moment presents. Gratitude for the present moment and the fullness of life now is true prosperity. You can practice this by taking any routine activity that normally is a means to an end and giving it your fullest attention. When you wash your hands, pay attention to all the sense perceptions associated with the activity: the sound of the water, the movement of your hands, the scent of the soap and so on.
4. Keep your inner space clear: See if you can catch yourself complaining, remove yourself from the situation, change it or accept it totally.
5. Watch out for any kind of defensiveness within yourself. What are you defending? An illusory identity, an image in your mind, a fictitious entity. In the light of your consciousness, the unconscious pattern will then quickly dissolve. This is the end of all arguments and power games, which are so corrosive to relationships. Power over others is weakness disguised as strength.

"Time is what keeps the light from reaching us. There is no greater obstacle to God than time."
Meister Eckhart, 13th century spiritual teacher