

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

What A Bunch of Losers

A sermon preached August 24, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Exodus 1:8 - 2:10

Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, "When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live." But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them." So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to

Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

In *Coming into the Country*, John McPhee's classic book about Alaska, he tells of spending some time with a back-to-the-lander – a rugged modern day homesteader who fished, hunted, and gathered virtually all his food, and whose whole energy was focused on carving out a life deep in the wilderness without the aid of modern conveniences or, for that matter, the company of others.

In the presence of this throwback of a mountain man who had denied himself virtually all the conveniences of modern life, McPhee was chagrined to unroll his space-age sleeping bag made of miracle synthetic material rated to below zero comfort, and his feelings of unworthiness deepened when he pulled out his rubberized nylon inflatable pillow. Apologizing to his host for being such a wimp, he was told, "No apologies necessary. We're here to smooth things out, not to make them rougher."

According to the stories in Exodus, Egypt was out to make things much rougher for the Hebrews. It's a theme that is developed and redeveloped throughout scripture. Thus, in Exodus the Pharaoh's fear of the Hebrew's strength inspires him to issue an edict that all male babies born to the Hebrews be destroyed. In the New Testament the Wise Men's declaration that the King of the Jews has been born drives Herod to issue his own murderous decision to slay Hebrew boys under the age of two. Where does Matthew tell us Joseph and Mary and the baby escape to? Egypt, for it is "out of Egypt I will call my son," Matthew tells us. Therefore, as Jesus is represented as the new Moses, whose name Exodus explains means "drawn out of water," thus John the Baptist draws Jesus out of the water of baptism, whereupon a voice declares, "This is my son with whom I am well pleased."

The most profound connection between Moses and Jesus, however, is that theme of freedom that runs throughout scripture – a theme that transcends the stories of either Jesus or Moses, that stitches together the Torah, the prophets, the Psalms, the Testaments, that expresses the very nature of God. The freedom of God works within human history to release the captives, to

dethrone the despots, to undo the ties that bind, to – in the words of that great spiritual – “let my people go.” The work of God is to smooth things out, not make them rougher. It is perhaps made most extraordinarily clear in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.... [Luke 4:18-19]*

Jesus reads this passage before others in the synagogue and declares that the promise is being fulfilled in their hearing. This enrages them and they cart Jesus off to a cliff to throw him to his death, whereupon we come up against another great theme of scripture – namely, how the freedom of God scares the dickens out of people. Repeatedly scripture describes how God’s freedom contradicts human restrictions, whether it’s the imperial power of the day, cultural practices and prejudices, fear of difference or change, and persistent human perversity. This line from Isaiah sums it up very well: *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. [Isaiah 55:8-9]*

It is not the way of imperial power to want the free and full flourishing of humanity in all its shapes and forms. It is the way of imperial power to exercise a fevered need to be in control and clamp down on things. In scripture these powers stand raw against the spiritual landscape, whether Egypt in Moses’ time, Babylon in Isaiah’s time, or Rome in Jesus’ time. Time and again the despots of the day stomp their heavy foot and demand obedience, and time and again the heroes of the Bible refuse, knowing that to worship the God who acts in freedom means that we are free to deny power to the noisy, saber-rattling, fear-mongering power of the day whatever and whomever it may be.

To do so is rarely safe. Indeed, to do so is always risky, not simply because there might be an empire that is going to jump on us with both feet if we do, but due to our own internal routines of restriction which we impose upon ourselves and others around us. We are frightened to be free. We strike a devil’s bargain and create bondages that we think will protect us from difference, and we surrender liberties that could lead to human flourishing but about which we are deeply suspicious when someone we don’t approve of has them. In short, freedom is not primarily a political issue; it is a spiritual issue. It appears in the tension between God’s Spirit working to lead people out of whatever bondage, and our personal imperiums which would keep ourselves and others in their place.

Fear works to mitigate the threat God’s freedom represents to our control. It was fear that prompted the escaping Hebrews to revolt under Moses’ leadership when their hunger in the wilderness led them to long for their well-fed slavery in Egypt. It was fear that led the religious officials and the Romans to conspire to rid themselves of the pesky Jesus who proclaimed a new kind of freedom regarding the nature of God, declaring liberty from religious controls that had lost their meaning and purpose. It was fear that divided the early church between Jew and Gentile prompting the Apostle Paul’s stirring words to the

Galatians: "...the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.... There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [Galatians 3:24-26, 28]

This writing of Paul's preceded Matthew's writing of his gospel where tension had developed around that age-old issue of fear and control. It is there in the passage we read this morning concerning *the keys of the kingdom of heaven*, and in the words *bind* and *loose*. Each gospel account has its own set of issues to emphasize within the gospel story, and one of Matthew's concerns is church leadership and control – what it's for, who shall have it, and how it will work.

This is an issue forever unresolved despite Matthew's best efforts. In his writings, authority is given to the disciples in general and to Peter in particular. Primarily authority is given to the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, namely the confession that Jesus is "the Messiah, the son of the living God." That is, it is not flesh-and-blood Peter which is the rock, but the faith of the church that is the bedrock of all that we are and do.

But having confessed Jesus Christ, it would continue to be a problem to be the church of Jesus Christ. Nothing is more evident today in the vast spread of sects, denominations, congregations, and theologies that being the church has never been easy, never been pure, and never likely to be brought happily under a common understanding. That is, we and our spiritual forebears have found the foundation upon which the church is built very rocky, indeed. And like the biblical stories which relate the struggle for freedom and human flourishing of people's long ago, our contemporary histories relate continuing struggles. The freedom of God still contends with our propensity to give undue influence to our wills which fear losing control, fear having to change our minds, fear having to adjust our moods and attitudes to some new reality God is bringing into being. Surely the central question scripture raises is that one Jesus puts to Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" – it is a question each of us must answer. Surely the second most powerful question in scripture is that asked by Paul of the Galatians: *Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits? How can you want to be enslaved to them again?* [Galatians 4:9]

History books are too small to record all the ways the church of Jesus Christ has failed to live the freedom Christ's crucifixion secured. The church has so often been guilty of institutionalizing the prejudices of the culture in which it operates. The most obvious cases have afflicted non-whites, women, and homosexuals, but there countless other examples of ways the church has become identified with binding instead of loosening, with regulating rather than liberating, and with maintaining the fences rather than installing more gates.

This is neither an apology for libertinism nor an argument that the church should have no standards. It is a stance against determining those standards in fear, or spiritually regressing out of fear of change, or cherishing tradition over human flourishing, or implying righteousness is always old and perversity always

new. It is a stance against the notion that faith in Christ equates with saying who we are not instead of articulating who we are, and that following Christ is a prescribed and dour, not experimental and joyous style of life. And it is the fear produced by certitude around things we don't and can't, for certain, know.

Barbara Brown Taylor, Episcopal priest and pastor, now teacher, wrote in her book *Leaving Church* about members of her parish who tried to live a bit outside the mainstream: *"...I had spent hours talking with people who had trouble believing. For some, the issue was that they believed less than they thought they should about Jesus. They were not troubled by the idea that he may have had two human parents instead of one or that his real presence with his disciples after his death might have been more metaphysical than physical. The glory they beheld in him had more to do with the nature of his being than with the number of his miracles, but they had suffered enough at the hands of true believers to learn to keep their mouths shut. For others, the issue was that they believe more than Jesus. Having beheld his glory, they found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said that it should not be.... These people not only feared being shunned for their unorthodox narratives, they also feared sharing some of the most powerful things that had ever happened to them with people who might dismiss them."*

Of herself and her role, Brown writes, *"I wanted out of the belief business and back into the beholding business. I wanted to recover the kind of faith that has nothing to do with being sure what I believe and everything to do with trusting God to catch me though I am not sure of anything."*

In the binding and loosing business that Matthew's passage assigned to the disciples, there has been more of the former than the latter. Our own ancestors, the Puritans, have waggishly been defined as those who sat around fearing that someone somewhere was having a good time.

Holding responsibility for binding and loosing is a heavy load. In that regard, I guess I'd prefer others consider us a bunch of losers than a tribe of binders. Brian Blount, newly appointed president of Union Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, has spoken on these themes. *"What does an unbound church look like?" he rhetorically asks. "The unbound church isn't tethered to its safe space sanctuaries, but operates behind the enemy lines of poverty and social injustice. The unbound church isn't tethered to tradition, but builds upon tradition to create new traditions as it engages the world in new ways.... The unbound church isn't tethered to the idea that church members ought all to look alike and think alike, but drags people of every physical hue and theological complexion into its spiritual and missional endeavors. The unbound church doesn't sit on the sidelines while politicians and lawyers and activities decide our social fate; it lives and operates as powerfully on a social and political battlefield.... Live unleashed. That is our calling."*

The more we bind others the more we ourselves are bound. The more we open our hearts to one another, the more we will behold the newness God is creating in our midst. Let us work to untie the "nots" – spelled n-o-t-s – and without fear embrace the future of God.