

Jeremiah 1:4-10
Luke 13:10-17

Freedom
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A whole range of negative emotions went through me as I watched the news the other day. It showed a group of “christians” outside a Mosque in Florida as the worshippers gathered for evening prayers. These “christians” were shouting, “Jesus hates you” to those entering the Mosque (hope I would feel the same way if they were doing this to any people or group). Now our American freedom gives them the right to assemble and to shout such phrases...but, as I read and study the New Testament and the Gospels I do not find a Jesus who hates. Rather I find one who loves and who demonstrates that love in a variety of ways to individuals and groups who would be “hated” and who stand on the edges of society—remember the Samaritan woman? (A quick note: Muslim is the designation of a people, Islam is a religion. There are Muslims who are Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, atheist, etc. We often seem to forget this.)

The Scripture texts for today were chosen long before the events of the past days but they speak to me about what is happening in some parts of our nation. Here we have a chance encounter by Jesus with a woman who stands, in some ways, outside the community. We are told in Luke that it was Jesus’ custom on the Sabbath to attend the Synagogue and to participate in the service. As passages were read he would have been invited to comment on them. To set the scene – In the synagogue men and women would not be seated together. The women may even have been separated from the proceedings by a curtain—they could hear but not see the proceedings. Women would not have been permitted in the men’s area.

The NRSV says, “Just then there appeared a woman...” Now, I wondered what the lesson of the day was. What was Jesus teaching/talking about as this woman entered? Jesus sees the woman and recognized a child of God in need of healing. There is no indication that she came for healing, she came for worship. As he sees her he calls her forward (does she come into the restricted area, reserved for the men only?). Here on the Sabbath he releases her from 18 years of bondage. She becomes the lesson of the day.

The whole atmosphere of the synagogue worship is changed. The woman begins to praise God for what has just happened. But there are rules and regulations that must be followed. There are rules about a woman’s place in the synagogue and in worship. There are rules about what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath. To this end, the synagogue ruler rebukes and admonishes the people (and Jesus). There are six days in which you can come for healing, but this is not one of those six days. You can come on any other day. He is not opposed to the healing, just the day it was done. In his religion God doesn’t heal on the Sabbath – but God just healed on the Sabbath.

Jesus responds with one word, Hypocrites! (Not my word but the one Jesus uses). He knows that the ruler of the synagogue and others there find a reason to do things on the Sabbath that is also against the Law. Who there has not untied a donkey or an ox and led it to water on the Sabbath? Why did they not provide enough water to see it through the Sabbath? But, in their concern for the animal they break the Sabbath Laws. Are not people more important than animals?

Jeremiah is called. Jeremiah’s call is to stand against the hypocrites of his day. He is called as a “mere boy” and yet God promises Jeremiah strength to stand and speak – his words are to call a people back to God. Jeremiah, too, wants to break years of bondage – to set a people free to worship and praise God.

She has been in bondage for 18 years. She has now been set free and what does she do with this new freedom? She praises God. She and Jesus break the accepted norms of their day. The freedom she has been given is the freedom to love and praise God. Now a woman is praising God in the synagogue. What next? Have the rules been changed? There are rules, rules that have stood for generations and now they are being challenged.

Looking at the Gospels – Jesus releases us from hate and releases us to love. Our call is to demonstrate to a broken world the love of God. Our call is to demonstrate “love” to the world. And for me, standing and shouting at any group, “Jesus hates you” is not demonstrating the love of Christ to the world. What worries me the most about our world today is “christian” hatred of people and ideologies. We may not embrace their theology or ideology but we will not change them by hatred. Was it not love that won us to Christ? Someone demonstrated to us the love of God. They showed us the love God has by Christ coming and loving us. Is that not how we have been called to share with the world? The love of God for all peoples—even us.

Now, unfortunately, there are radicals in every religion or organization. Do we want people to lump us in the same category of some radical/fundamental Christian groups? No, we shout, “we are not like them.” We don’t believe in their radical approach to understanding God. Just as you cannot lump every one of us into the same category, we cannot lump every one of “them” into the same category. But we do have one thing in common—we are ALL sinners in need of God’s grace.

I kept coming back to the same image. It was a worship service in celebration of the life of Pope John Paul. We were gathered at the Our Lady of Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles. There peoples of all faith were gathered to celebrate in worship. I was seated with a Rabbi and the Imam from the local Islamic center. They were good friends. They were part of our interfaith clergy group. As we sat and waited for the service to begin we were talking about their recent endeavors to bring their people together in dialogue. The Rabbi had hosted an event for the youth of the Mosque at the Synagogue. The Imam had hosted the Jewish youth at the Mosque. They had had several weeks of summer camp where they had gathered Muslim and Jewish youth to learn about one another, make friends and see each other beyond the stereotypes. As the conversation went on they both looked at me and asked, “Why can’t we find any Christians who will join us?” I had no answer. They were open to it – they wanted to learn from us and have us learn from them.

I wondered what Jesus would do in such circumstance. I think I know. He came to love the whole world and he was interested in dialogue with anyone who would come. His life demonstrated love. But too often his followers are reluctant to demonstrate the love he had to the world. It is easier to stand and shout, “Jesus hates you” than to enter into a dialogue and a demonstration of love.

Jeremiah is called to bring the “word of the Lord” to the people of God (we need to remember for the most part prophets are calling the people of God back to God). Jeremiah wants them to demonstrate to the world who God really is. They were called to be a people who would demonstrate to the world the true expression of God and God’s love. However, they got caught up in themselves, a chosen people—their Laws and regulations became more important than people. And in this they lost the very core of who they were. Jesus came to set us back on the right path, “For God so loved the world...” Jesus came to set us free to LOVE – and that is our FREEDOM! We are set free to love!

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989