

Matthew 15: 21-28

Personal Freedom

Sunday May 10, 2015

©Rev. Dr. Susan E. Cartmell

The Congregational Church of Needham

Our theme for May is Freedom. You may think that freedom is a political term or a legal idea. But it is also one of the most important concepts in Holy Scripture. The Bible says that the Hebrews believed God created people to be free. Just as God guided them to freedom from slavery so God would help them to find a way to live freely in the world. The arc of Biblical history trends toward greater and greater freedom. From the time of Moses to King David and then to Jesus the people in the Bible yearned to be free in every way, politically, economically and personally. In fact it is the Biblical attitude toward freedom that inspired the seminal documents that shaped our nation's history.

When we listen to the words written by the Founding Fathers in the Constitution, The Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence we recognize that they demonstrate the clear connection between our faith and our concept of national freedom. Thomas Jefferson and the others established the principle of personal independence as one of the gifts of the Creator when he wrote the Declaration of Independence in July of 1776. The premise of that document is that God created us as human beings who were meant to be free. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among them life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." One of our basic human endowments is that God intended that we be free. That is in part why the Bible spends so much time telling stories about freedom in both Old and New Testament. Last week we considered the story of the Hebrews crossing the Red Sea.

Today we look at a story about Jesus. Today we read a fascinating story in which Jesus debates with a woman, and she gets the better of him in the end. It is the story of the Syrophenician Woman. Let's take a look at what she can teach us about freedom.

In the first place this story reminds us that freedom does not mean anything unless you have personal freedom. Real freedom is the ability to know what you need, to find your voice and to speak your mind. The New Testament is full of examples of people who lived in trying circumstances but were not defeated, people who lost many forms of freedom that we hold dear, but never lost the ability to speak their mind. Jesus, himself, was one of the best examples in all of human history of a person who should have been subdued or beleaguered living among people who had no political ambitions and few economic options. Yet he never became a victim or gave up hope. He never lost his freedom, even living in circumstances that would have crushed most people.

Jesus himself did not pay any attention to the ways that society tried to hem people in. He flaunted convention. He thought for himself. He spoke his mind. Though he should have been powerless, he enjoyed renowned status among his people as a great healer. Even as a Jewish peasant, he held his own with renowned scholars and debated like a senior rabbi. Though it was easy to become discouraged or even depressed, Jesus chose instead to flaunt the social rules about class and gender, and to live on his own terms. He exercised such a stunning degree of freedom that many people thought he had taken leave of his senses.

This story in Matthew 15 is one of the edgiest passages in scripture. A Jew is talking to a Gentile. A woman is arguing with a man. The man is listening. A Jewish man changes his mind because of something this foreign woman says. If we hear this story through modern ears we miss how utterly remarkable it is.

Here we discover that he was not alone in his strong sense of personal freedom. The woman in our story was also remarkably independent, despite her circumstances. Jesus was touring the region in Southern Turkey known as Tyre and Sidon in a province of the Roman Empire known as Syria in those days. There he met a foreign woman who approached him and started to shout at him to heal her daughter. She made such a ruckus that the disciples felt nervous and asked Jesus to make her stop. But Jesus would not be pressured because he had no sympathy for her. The Jews, he believed, suffered more than her people and he came to heal them, and could not compromise himself to help her. He compared her to a dog who steals food from the children of God. By rights it should have ended there. Her people had more power than the Jews, and he called her on her entitlement. On top of that he was a man putting down a woman by comparing her to an aggressive dog. Insult and injury should have sent her back home licking her wounds.

Women in those days were not supposed to speak, but somehow this woman broke the mold and found her voice. No matter how many rights you have or privileges you enjoy freedom does not mean much if you cannot speak your mind. In fact when she speaks she changes Jesus' mind. One reason Matthew includes this story is to show how much Jesus respected people who were not afraid to ask for what they needed.

Freedom means nothing unless you can find your voice and find your opinions respected. We all know folks who have every reason to feel free but who have lost some essential piece of their freedom because they live with someone who undermines them or causes them to second guess themselves. We all know young adults who have every advantage to become free, yet they are stymied and cannot take wings and fly because they don't trust themselves, or remain too anxious to try. We all know families where one person is bullied so much that they cannot really speak for themselves. It

is easy to ignore their plight or try to explain away their plight but these people are in a personal prison. They are not free. Freedom includes the ability to speak.

In the second place sometimes love enables us to find our voice. Sometimes it takes love for someone else to give us the strength to fight for ourselves and for them. This woman was so strong because she feared for her daughter. She loved her child enough to argue with a man who was a great Jewish healer. Love and worry propelled her to throw caution to the wind and to risk propriety if it would make a difference.

This woman had chutzpa. She countered that she knew he was there for the Jews but wanted only the crumbs from his table. It was such a brave and brazen comeback that it utterly transformed Christ and he acquiesced. But what we forget is that her courage is hard to imagine.

I imagine that her worries about her daughter turned her into a a ferocious advocate. Her love has been turned into indomitable devotion. On this Mother's Day when we will all probably spend some time considering our own mothers, our adopted moms, and everyone who nurtured us – some of the most cherished memories will be times when our mothers fought for us. They will be times when they endeared themselves more than they may know because they took on an authority figure and fought for us. They kept advocating when no one else was listening. They simply loved us so much that they refused to give up on us. If, in fact, these moments were utterly uncharacteristic, somehow it makes them all the more precious and endearing. There is something wonderful when love, fierce love, turns otherwise polite ladies into mama bears. Often it is love for someone else that can help us to find our voice, or press our case, or stand up for what we believe. Often it is love that eventually helps us to find our way to freedom.

Finally the story says that God sees us. Jesus would have passed right by this woman. He never would have known about her daughter. He would have missed the way the mother loved her little girl. She was so insignificant the Bible never records her name. She challenges God's Son but God is okay with that. She holds Jesus accountable in a way that few people in scripture do, and the Bible seems to say that she has inherent worth. Nothing she does can render her invisible to God.

Often in life, it feels like we are invisible. No one really knows the things we deal with, or worry about or pray for. There was an advertisement during the Super Bowl which has received lots of attention. It was an ad for Nationwide Insurance Company about a woman named Mindy who goes through life feeling invisible. It was so popular that it inspired a whole series of ads. Mindy was so convinced that she would not be noticed that she took food from restaurant tables and stole basketballs while people were playing. But at the end of each ad she would inevitably push her luck and discover that people did see her. In one ad she tried to kiss Matt Damon only to find he won't let her; suddenly she is not invisible any more. People responded to the ad because we often feel invisible.

But I am here to tell you that the antidote to feeling invisible is not really an insurance company. No, it is God. No matter how invisible you feel or have become, God sees you. God listens to you. God gets who you are, and what you need. The Bible tracks the stories of the Jews who were perpetually overlooked and undervalued. They should have been a footnote in history. These people who never amounted to anything politically or militarily believed that God noticed them. They were convinced that no matter how low their stock God was on their side. God could see them. They were never invisible to God.

If God appreciated those former Hebrew slaves then God sees you and me. If Christ valued this Syrophenician woman then Christ can see your gifts, and how much you love your family, and how

determined you are to do what is best for them. If God could hear that woman God will surely hear your prayers and answer you too.