

The Freedom in Slavery

For most of us, yesterday's 4th of July holiday may have meant — among other things — a trip to the lake, an evening of fireworks, a backyard barbecue with friends. But since it was originally planned as a day for celebrating freedom, there may also have been people here and there who actually spent a few minutes thinking about freedom and being consciously grateful for it. Not many, I would guess, but a few — and I found myself wondering what the word “freedom” meant for those few. I asked the little girl who lives next door what the word meant to her, and she said exactly what I would have said at her age: “It means I get to do whatever I want to do.” She is a highly intelligent child, and someday she will discover that the most enjoyable freedoms often come only after we have accepted becoming slaves to some high form of bondage and discipline.

Let's consider two preachers and a poet, who not only understood that there is no such thing as absolute freedom, but also understood that the highest and happiest freedom invariably comes out of certain kinds of slavery. One of the preachers who spoke of freedom was Jesus of Nazareth who spoke the famous words, “You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free,” which rolls grandly off the tongue like a flourish of trumpets but is so ambiguous people have understood it in dozens of different ways. Catholic Christians were certain for centuries that they were the only ones who had this truth, and I grew up in a Protestant church just as positive that **it** held a monopoly on truth, and one day when I was with some Mormon guides on a river in Idaho I picked up the Book of Mormon one of them had been reading before breakfast, and opened to a

paragraph underlined in red: “The Mormon church is the only true and correct church.” When I asked two young Mormons about it that day they both said, “That’s how it is, and that’s what we believe.”

So what did Jesus mean, exactly? What is the truth we are supposed to know? And when we know it, whatever it is, and we are free as a result of knowing it, what is the nature of that freedom? I can only guess at what he meant, but I feel sure he knew what most of us discover — that freedom is dangerous unless we are in some noble bondage that disciplines the use we make of it.

The other preacher was a man named Paul, who says he only discovered true freedom when he became a slave to the message of Christ, and learned to cast his whole life in the form of a servant to help others find what he had found. In bondage to the meaning of Christ’s life, he found freedom even in prison, and gave himself so gladly to others that a Duke University professor gave his book on Paul the title, *Slavery as Salvation.*, and then spent the rest of the book explaining what he meant.

I have been interested for years in the idea that only the bound are free, that out of the bondage of a great discipline comes the freedom to do great things. On the very simplest level, we learn about this paradox even as children. A day or so ago I watched a couple of adorable kids named Will and Katie play hopscotch on their driveway across the street. School was out, certain disciplines had been relaxed for them, they could do what they wanted to do — so what did they choose? They chose to make themselves a little *prison* so they could play a game inside the prison. They drew some squares and rectangles on the concrete, they surrendered

to certain rules of the game, and they found their fun in that mix of freedom and restraints. Nobody forced them to jump on one leg here, and two legs there, and pick up one stick in this spot, and two sticks in another. They could have chosen to violate the rules, but it would have stopped being enjoyable. The point of the game was see how well they could do in bondage.

Which brings me to the third witness, a poet. In addition to ministry, I had a parallel life as a professor of literature, and one of the hundreds of poems I have enjoyed with students is a Wordsworth sonnet that makes the point I'm trying to make this morning, and makes it — as you might expect — much better. I don't know what prompted Wordsworth to write the poem, but I can imagine that a friend said one day, "Why do you write sonnets? Don't you find those those things terribly restrictive? I thought there was a new freedom in the air for poets; why tie your mind in knots by trying to make sense while working within all the rules of the traditional sonnet?"

It's a logical question, because the sonnet **is** a kind of prison for a poet. Wordsworth had to say what he wanted to say in 14 lines — no more, no less — with each line limited to 10 syllables — no more, no less — and the rhyme scheme rigidly fixed so that he has to make sense inside that pattern. If you've never tried it, it's impossible to appreciate how skilfully Wordsworth found freedom in his self-imposed bondage. He begins by reminding us that the truly dedicated nun does not fret at her convent's narrow room, or the monk at his cramped cell, or the student at the discipline of a cloistered life. That last part always makes me remember my

first two years in a Tennessee college when every boy in my dormitory had to be in his room at 7 p.m. five nights a week so in that prison we would be free to become real students. That would seem intolerable slavery to modern youngsters, but I still cherish the memory of a bondage that made me free to do all sorts of things I could not otherwise have done with my life.

Wordsworth's point is that at times he feels the weight of *too much freedom*, and turns to the bondage of the sonnet for relief. Our lives need structure, which is why you've all heard people say at the end of a vacation, "Good to **go**....good to **get back!**" I remember how lost I was for a while when I came back home from three years of military service. I had been told when to eat, what to eat, what to wear, where to go and when to get there, and all of a sudden I had so much freedom I was loaded down with choices. After five months of that, it was a joy to return to college and the structure of the academic life. Another great poet, Robert Frost, understood perfectly the paradox we're considering when he defined freedom as "moving easy in harness." He knew that only the bound are free, just as Paul knew it when explained how he had found true freedom in his life when he surrendered to bondage as a follower of Christ.

I should probably have said by now that no one escapes some form of bondage. What it really means to be free is to be able to choose the form of slavery that will help you make the most of life. Ernie Campbell, who preached at the famous Riverside Church in New York City, told a group of us in conference one day that when he took early retirement from fulltime ministry he did it in order to do some "free-lance writing." Then he made

a painful discovery: that without the deadlines hanging over his head, without due dates, without the compulsion to finish something at a specified time, he could not keep going to turn out good stuff. Compulsion drives creativity! There are plenty of writers who know how necessary it is to work under the bondage of a deadline in order to get something finished.

Some of my colleagues in seminary, looking for an excuse to avoid laboring over a sermon, liked to say they preferred waiting to let the Spirit move them in their pulpits. It was a patent excuse for lack of self-discipline, and my preaching professor knew it. He said, “Boys, my advice would be to invite the Spirit into your rooms while you study so you can have lots of uninterrupted time together. Then if the Spirit doesn’t show up on Sunday morning, you’ll still have something worthwhile to say.” Several people who are present this morning remember a minister many years ago who told them often that he simply waited for the Spirit to prompt him when he stood up to preach. He didn’t last very long, because it became obvious that more often than not it seemed clear that the Spirit had made prior appointment with someone else. That young minister would have had the freedom to preach well on Sundays if he had been a slave during the week.

After I did a memorial service for Judge William Kandt a few days ago, his son wrote a thoughtful note of thanks in which he said, among other things, that he wanted me to “Please let Pat Jones know that we are all thankful he bothered to take piano lessons when he did.” Jim Kandt understood that great skill depends on long bondage, that Pat Jones has freedom to play the way he does for one reason only: a lifetime of enslavement to

music. I can easily take the few steps from here to the piano and sit down with my fingers on the keys, but I will not — by that simple action — be free to play. I am imprisoned by my lack of skill. I have no freedom to play because I never jailed myself to practice.

Neither did the young man who spoke from this pulpit last Sunday, although his mother and I hoped when he was young that he might learn to play the piano. His teacher was Elaine Nigh, who is now a member of our choir, and she did her part well but he didn't care for that particular form of bondage. Elaine considered telling him last Sunday when he was signing his book, *Morning Sun on a White Piano*, that if he had practiced more he might have been able to **play** that piano instead of just **writing** about it. There are many forms of bondage, of course, out of which the freedom to create may come. The enslavement he chose was to language, and he cherishes all the things he can now do because that lifelong surrender now allows him to make music with words.

This diversity of bondages was illustrated for me one day last week when a couple of plumbers stopped by on their way to some other job to see if I had a piping problem. One had been gone from Wichita for several years, but he had quite a memory. He said, "I've been here before....and you're a minister, right?" When I confessed that this was true, the other plumber decided this might be the time to ask how to pronounce a certain word he had seen in print. Since I've been more a slave to words than to plumbing, I encouraged him to say his word, but when he stammered once or twice and then came out with a sound like "ess-igg-us" I was totally lost.

The closest I could come to that was the word *exiguous*, but when he asked what that meant and I told him it was a rather exotic synonym for scanty, meager, slender, and sparse, and could that be it, he said, “No, that’s not it.”

So I belatedly got smart (which is the story of my life) and asked him where he had come across his word. It turns out he was a religious plumber. He said, “It’s that word they use about interpreting Scripture.” So I realized he meant *exegesis* and pronounced it for him, and we went on to have a great talk about theology. I happened that day to be at work on this very sermon, and when I went back up to the study I added this trivial incident as an example of how I had enjoyed the freedom of being able to help him only because of a lifetime of enslavement to language.

I think of people who have done far more with that freedom than I have, even while living under the most difficult circumstances. A book appeared one day called *The Road Mender*, written — according to the title page — by someone named Michael Fairless. People read that book and thought what a marvelous naturalist he must have been, traveling everywhere to record the glories of nature. It turned out that Michael Fairless was the penname of a sick woman who was dying, who lay in bed in a tiny room and wrote without a moan or a whimper. You can’t hear anything but birds and wind and brooks and bees. Bedfast, locked in prison....but gloriously free in mind and imagination.

It isn't always easy to look at a life and know when freedom is real and when it's only an illusion. The English poet Lord Byron woke up one morning in 1812 to find himself famous for something he had written. Intoxicated by success, he succumbed to that ancient lie told about freedom by the tempter in the Garden of Eden: "Do as you like, and you will be as gods." So he did that, and by age 29 was prematurely old and deeply disillusioned. Another man, much older, scarred from beatings and ridicule, wasted from shipwrecks and starvation, often in prison and close to dying, had spent his life in a noble bondage and was able to write these words: "I have become absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, neither messenger of Heaven nor monarch of earth, neither what happens today nor what may happen tomorrow....nor anything else in God's whole world has power to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

English nobleman who did what he liked....Paul the apostle, prisoner of Christ. which one, in the verdict of history, was truly free? Your life will be your answer.

Grant us the wisdom, Lord, to choose the right bondage — to discover with delight that in the prison of some great loyalty, we become in the truest and best sense, Children of God. Amen.