

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Living in Ordinary Time: Liberation”
Rev. Dr. John Judson
August 21, 2016

Luke 13:10-17, Exodus 20:8-11

Good guys and bad guys; they are usually easy to spot on the movie screen. The good guys are generally better looking than us, inventive, indestructible and almost always do the right thing. They do not have to be perfect, in fact many of them are flawed, yet we know that they will save the damsel in distress, or in the case of Disney’s Frozen, the damsel will do the saving. They care for the weak and powerless and they keep evil at bay. The bad guys are those who look slightly off, slightly evil. Often they have foreign accents or they look scary and mean; just consider the orcs in Lord of the Rings, or the aliens in well, any movie. They look like we should be afraid of them and so we are. In a sense these types of guys and gals in black or white hats are caricatures of human beings, set apart in order to make the story easy to understand.

For many of us this is the way that we read this morning’s story about Jesus and the head of the synagogue. We know who the good guy is, it is Jesus. We know that Jesus is the good guy because, well first off because he is Jesus. We also know Jesus is the good guy because he is going to heal the crippled woman regardless of anything thought or said. Even knowing that he might irritate some people he went for it. He knew that she had been crippled for perhaps, most of her life and so as we see it, love must be love in action and so he liberates her...he sets her free. The bad guy is the president of the synagogue. We know he is the bad guy because he appears to be a legalist who does not care that this woman has been crippled for 18 years. Even though it might be her only chance of being healed, he does not care. He is so stuck on the Sabbath rules and regulations he is willing to see this woman left as she is. So there you have it, the good guy and the bad guy face off and the outcome is that love wins out over law; good over evil. Except...except that is not what is actually going on here. And if this is where we leave it then we miss the heart of this story.

In order to understand we need a bit of background in how Jewish religious life actually works. First Judaism was and is a living tradition. What this means is that Jewish teachers are constantly arguing about what God desires. And in so doing they bring to their arguments, arguments from the scriptures, especially from the Torah. Rabbinic literature refers to this as Arguments from Heaven, meaning each side is trying their best to do what they believe God would have them do. In this case the president of the synagogue is not being a legalist, he is instead arguing directly from the Torah that the Sabbath is to be holy. There is to be no work done on it, and even healing is work. If one reads the Old testament, time and time again, the people of Israel are criticized for not following the Sabbath rules. He is not the bad guy. He is striving to do what the Torah tells him to do. Jesus is doing the same thing. Jesus is arguing from the Torah that liberating a cripple is a greater good than keeping the Sabbath. I realize that for many of us here this morning this seems like a strange thing to say because we don’t know of any Old Testament rules about healing. But what we need to understand is that the Torah is not just the rules of

the Old Testament but it is the entire narrative story of the first five books of the Old testament. And because of that reality, Jesus is arguing that liberation, setting God's people free is greater than the Sabbath because the Exodus, God's greatest act of liberation comes before Moses and the people are given the Sabbath. Thus liberation makes Sabbath possible...for both animals (leading an animal to water so it can rest) and for humans (allowing a woman to be healed so she can rest). The end result is that the leader is shamed because he understands that he had missed the clarity of Jesus' argument, and the people celebrate because liberation has arrived.

This story then is not about good guys and bad guys. This is a story about God's desire for liberation. This story is at the heart of all that Jesus says and does. At the beginning of the Gospel of Luke Jesus describes his ministry as proclaiming release to the captives and letting the oppressed go free. And we see Jesus do this throughout his ministry. He frees people from hunger by feeding them. He frees people from spirits by casting them out. We see Jesus freeing people from sin by forgiving them. We see Jesus freeing people from the power of sin and death by going to the cross. Liberation is what Jesus is all about. And so this story is one more episode where he lives into his mission; into the vision that God had given him. And this is what we were about these past two weeks in Kenya.

On the surface our trip appeared to be a construction trip. We went to complete the building of two classrooms on an existing school in Olongai in Maasai Land and a church in Tala, which is in the Kamba region of Kenya. Yet what we, and all of you by extension, were involved in were acts of liberation in the name of Jesus Christ. The school in Olongai offers Maasai children an opportunity for an education they might otherwise have received. This brings liberation because it offers them a glimpse of a life beyond the customs of child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). It also prepares them for life in the wider world which is slowly but surely moving in upon them. We saw liberation when we met with Faith Kasoni. Faith is the first girl, now a young woman, to refuse to be circumcised by her tribe, the Samburu. And even though she was an outcast from her village she returned to other Samburu and taught health practices, and became an inspiration to other girls to say no to FGM. Our part in Faith's life and work is that First Foundation is helping her to receive an education so she can continue her work with the Samburu, and we delivered the money for this while we were there. The church in Tala offers liberation in that the Kamaba are a largely unchurched tribe, some of whom still live in the fear and superstition of their ancestors. By offering a permanent church we offer them liberation through knowing the love and grace of God in Jesus Christ. We also visited a girl's rescue center in the Maasai Mara that takes in girls who have been rescued from child-marriage, for some girls as young as eight, girls whose parents cannot feed them, and girls who do not want to undergo FGM. We pooled our money so that they could be hooked into the electric grid, thus enabling the girls to study at night...and through education break free and become whatever it is that God is leading them to become.

Liberation is what God is all about. Liberation is what Jesus Christ came to offer us; liberation from fear, need, hate, ignorance and all that keeps us from becoming the full human beings we are created to be. Liberation is then what we are to be about. My question to each of you then, my challenge to you, is to ask, how am I being an agent of liberation, helping my friends, my family, my city and my world become the kind of creation God desires and longs for us for all human beings?