

Freedom Isn't Just Another Word

Mark 6: 1-13

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Rev. Marc Sherrod, ThD

I was a bit surprised the other day to receive a postcard announcing that the Board of Trustees of my alma Mater, Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, the 10th oldest college in the nation and the only holdout as a college exclusively for men, had elected a new president. My surprise and delight was that Christopher R. Howard is an African-American. Ordinarily, race of a college president is no big deal, thanks in no small measure to the tremendous gains we've made in race relations over the past decade. And even the wildly popular novel *The Shack* has gotten into the action with its depiction of the traditional God the Father as a kind of jolly African-American woman. But Farmville, Virginia, Price Edward County, 60 miles south of Richmond, where my college is located, is the infamous county, where for several years in the Civil War of the 1960s, the local school board, rather than follow directive *Brown vs. Board of Education*, chose to close all the country's public schools, rather than provide equal education for all the white and black children. Private schools were established for whites only, and the white school board simply closed the schools meant to serve blacks.

Even when I attended my conservative college in the late 1970s, it was mainly only the white children in Farmville who couldn't afford a private education who went to the public schools. So, last week, when I opened the mail, the election of a young African-American president was the furthest thing from my mind. The irony of history never ceases to amaze.

“... One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” There are few more powerful, more regularly and publically spoken and powerful words in the American vocabulary, although perhaps many citizens don't realize that “under God” was actually added in the 1950s to counter the perceived growing threat from a godless communism.

There are so many around the world who would embrace freedom, if only they had the chance. We are richly blessed. It's what holds us together, freedom, keeps us strong as a nation, and enables us to turn great power and wealth into a means for helping others.

But also, it is true, as some have said that America's original sin is the sin of slavery and its horrible aftermath. Like many of you, I grew up on the Christ-haunted south, where the most segregated hour is still 11:00 on Sunday morning. I don't mean to suggest that the Church shouldn't have differing styles and songs and ways of being the church, but it's too easy, if we aren't careful, to slip into a “live and let live” attitude without really contemplating the meaning of race in the Church and race in our nation's life.

The recent issue of *Newsweek Magazine* features a list of books, not necessarily best sellers or books on the college freshman's must read list, but books that “open a window on the time we live in.” I was glad the editors of *Newsweek* put the memoir of John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, on the list. I happen to be reading this fascinating story, memoir of how the son of poverty and brutal discrimination, through his work with civil rights movement and its leaders, how he eventually became a congressman from Georgia, with an unbelievable worth ethic, devotion to the righteousness of God, and a true love and respect for all God's children. He had the keen awareness that history can only be changed for the good by non-violence and the kindly love that casts out fear and bears the fruits of freedom that scripture talks about.

Whether, for John Lewis, the pursuit of such freedom meant being beaten and attacked by Bull Connor's deputies and dogs in Selma, spending seemingly endless days and nights in jails for the "crime" of having black skin, or being ostracized by his own community when he refused to resort to violence, Lewis remains, even today, a true champion of freedom. Perhaps the richest moment at President Obama's inauguration in January was his warm embrace of Lewis and that redeemed American racial past that Lewis embodied.

For Lewis and many other civil rights protestors, black and white, their motivation goes directly back to the peace ethic of Jesus, to the Biblical ideal of freedom rooted in Israel's Exodus from slavery, and to scripture's word that "God is no respecter of persons."

But as John Lewis and a host of civil rights workers have demonstrated, it's tough to be a prophet in your own country, in the place where you grew up. Mark's Gospel, in our scripture lesson for today, doesn't give us specifics, but Jesus' teachings on that Sabbath on the day in question disturbed many of the hometown folks, leading to questions about his family lineage and whether he could truly be who he said he was.

If you know Mark's narrative in the previous chapter, chapter five, it is there that Jesus heals the demoniac who was living among the tombs. If there was ever someone who begged for freedom and was despised and neglected, it would have been this man named Legion. If you recall the story, you know that the unclean spirits which had overtaken this crazed man asked Jesus to send them into a herd of 2000 swine. Jesus did so and the herd, which promptly went crazy, ran over the bank and into the sea where they died. Although the incident raises many questions, it reminds us that people, no matter how despised or seemingly unclean, come first in God's community.

Such a feat aroused not a little conversation, and when Jesus arrives home to Nazareth, folks there have likely already heard the news and formed their opinions. He identifies himself to them as a prophet, and soon he also realizes that he is not welcome there and his power to heal has been diminished and he couldn't do much good there.

But it's here, also that Jesus gives a mission to the 12, especially he gives to each one of them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, to make people whole, to restore their freedom to be fully human again. These disciples are supposed to travel light, to depend on the hospitality of strangers, to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to preach repentance from sins.

It's not always easy to figure out parallels between our mission today and that mission Jesus gave the original 12, but as the 12 called others to repent, so too does our mission include a word to our world about repentance, peace, forgiveness, spiritual renewal and the opportunity God gives all of us to begin life right now, without any baggage of the past, to enjoy the freedom the gospel gives.

As Martin Luther King once said, "the arc of history is long, and it bends towards justice." The goal of freedom is to create the beloved community; freedom to gather at table as one people who stand together for peace, mercy, justice, and love – in our world and in our homes and in this community.

I close with these words from John Lewis' memoir. He writes: "There is an old African proverb: When you pray, move your feet. As a nation, if we care for the Beloved Community, we must move our feet, our hands, our hearts, our resources to build and not to tear down, to reconcile and not to divide, to love and not to hate, to heal and not to kill. In the final analysis, we are one people, one family, one house – the American house, the American family." (p. 503)

And, I might add, we are God's house, and God's family, especially here in worship, in table fellowship, in answering God's call to freedom and to love.

So let it be.