

From Mourning to Dancing©

Psalm 30:1-5, 11-12; Mark 5:21-43

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“Weeping my linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.” Ps. 30:5b

We are all aware, that this Wednesday is our big national holiday. We celebrate our independence with flags flying, lots of red, white and blue décor, with fireworks that remind us of “the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air, giving proof through the night that the flag was still there...”

Our national anthem was written by Francis Scott Key on September 14, 1814, after witnessing the bombing of Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor by British Ships of the Royal Navy. It was the Battle of Baltimore in the War of 1812. When Key saw the large U.S. flag flying triumphantly, with its 15 stars and 15 strips, indicating victory for the U.S., he was inspired to write the song that became our National Anthem – The Star Spangled Banner. If Julia were here this morning we would be singing that song.

Americans are, for the most part, very patriotic. Most of us respect our flag and what it symbolizes, and we honor our veterans and all who are serving right now, who have sacrificed so much for our freedom. We celebrate Independence Day, commemorating the adoption of the Declaration of Independence on July 4th, 1776.

Freedom is a precious thing and on days like the 4th of July we remember that freedom isn't really free. It was, and usually is, very costly. Many have died for the sake of liberty.

Freedom is something we take for granted so often – until we find ourselves caged in. Maybe it's in jail or prison. Maybe it's in a holding, detention place for immigrants, or for their children.

Maybe it's fear – the fear we are told many migrants have experienced in El Salvador and other countries where gangs are ruling, raping and killing. Maybe it's the fear woman live in because of domestic abuse, or sex trafficking. Fear can be like prison.

Being in a financial crisis can feel like being in a prison. There is nothing better than getting out of debt, out from under that burden.

Also, being sick with something that is debilitating can be restraining and can limit your ability to do things; it affects your quality of life in many ways.

A couple of weeks ago, as most of you know, I was an elected commissioner to our 223rd General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). This was no vacation! It was a tremendous amount of work – lots of reading and preparation ahead of time (along with all my pastor responsibilities here). And the meetings were long, long days and nights. We had great responsibilities in listening and voting what we felt God was leading us to. Of course, some sensed God's leading in a different way than others and so we heard a lot of debate over issues.

There were many great highlights and moments of being proud to be a Presbyterian. The opening worship with a large choir of around 200 members and a full orchestra was very inspiring. Those old hymns that we sometimes think have lost their spark just came alive in that setting.

But our church has always seen social justice as a very important part of our faith. Following in Jesus' footsteps and trying to live and work by his teachings, we have stood up for things in our world that we felt were important – things that would make a difference in the lives of people who are poor and oppressed. Jesus taught that love is the first and most important commandment. Loving God and loving others. The Pharisees would argue about the law and Jesus would argue about love. Someone said “Where love is, law will be unnecessary. Where love is, law will not matter.”

In our opening worship service our offering totaled over \$47,200! This offering was designated to free people who had been sitting in jail, or in a work camp, because they were too poor to pay the cash bail bond. Some were there for small misdemeanors like Jaywalking. Many of them had been waiting a long time for their day in court. If they had not been so poor they could have been out with their families as they waited. They could have been working, even as meager a job as it might have been.

For two years our leaders worked with activists there in St. Louis to arrange something significant that we could do to help. I had the blessing of marching with around 800 Presbyterians that day as we walked the mile in high heat to the Justice Center where we would give a check to those in charge, who would then go and pay the bail money to release a number of pre-screened prisoners. I do not know how many and it didn't happen that day but it was a thrill to know that we had done something meaningful for people who were oppressed.

*Jesus said in his opening ministry speech, as he read from Isaiah,
“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, (Luke 4:18)*

We marched behind a big banner that said “Freedom Should Be Free” and we chanted “No justice – No Peace!”

I wish I could have seen those prisoners faces as they came out into the free world. I think our theme today would apply, don't you? The psalmist writes in Psalm 30: “*You have turned my mourning into dancing.*” I wonder if some of them came dancing out of the jail.

Looking at the story in Mark from chapter 5, we hear about a man – a leader in the synagogue whose 12-year-old daughter is dying. He begs Jesus to come immediately and heal her. He has heard of the things Jesus can do and he has no one else to turn to.

I can't help but wonder if Jairus was always a supporter and believer in Jesus, or if he came to Jesus as a last resort. We read often about Jewish leaders having so much animosity toward Jesus. Either way, he comes and he seems to believe that Jesus is a healer who can save his daughter.

But in this story, we have another story. Mark likes to use the term “on the way.” While he doesn’t say it here in this text, it actually was something that happened while Jesus was on the way with Jairus to heal his daughter.

There was a woman there who was desperate for healing. She had a female problem that had caused her much distress for years. She had a hemorrhage that could not be stopped. She had spent a lot of money on medical bills, going from one doctor to the next, seeking healing but nothing helped. She was imprisoned in her own body.

For a Jewish woman to have this issue was a real social problem. She was considered unclean. She could not go through the purification rites because it never ended. Which meant she was not pure and she could not go near the temple or the synagogue or associate with many people.

I know there are many people these days who could care less about attending a church and worshipping with other believers. But for those of us who are active and committed, it is an important part of our lives. Can you imagine being banned from coming to worship? Being looked at as someone who is not worthy enough to be in the midst of other worshippers in the house of God?

For a Jewish woman, that had to be heart breaking. She must have longed for worship; ached to be in the special place designated for prayer and scripture reading. She was, in a way, in prison. She wanted to be set free.

And so, she knew about Jesus and heard that he was there in the vicinity and she dared to go out in the crowd and as he walked by, she thought to herself, “if only I can touch his robe; just brush my hands against the hem of his garment, that might be enough.” She didn’t call out to him or beg him. She silently pushed through the crowd just to touch his robe.

Another word Mark uses a lot is “immediately.” And he tells us that immediately this woman felt the healing power and knew she was free. And Jesus felt it too. He felt the power go through him and flow to her and he stopped and asked who touched him. And she fearfully came and confessed it was she. He told her her faith had made her well.

Oh my goodness! Don’t you just know her long time of mourning was turned into dancing! Immediately!

Well, and so was Jairus’ mourning. Because even though they told him it was too late – his daughter was dead – Jesus said, “oh no it’s not.” And he took her hand and said to her “Talitha cum” which means “Little girl, get up.” Jesus raised her up from death to life again. She got up and began walking around. But I’m guessing there was much dancing and praising God in that house that day.

There are so many ways that we can need to be set free. Jesus went about healing, teaching, chasing out demons, calming the storms and the fears that went with them.

Of course, the greatest freedom we have been given is freedom from the bonds of sin and death. There was no cash-only bail bond to give for our freedom from those chains. We could not ever pay for our own freedom. We were doomed to be in the prison of our sinful lives for eternity.

Freedom should be free. But freedom is costly to the one who is giving it. Jesus paid a huge price for our freedom. He gave his life on a horrible, painful, criminals cross. He suffered terrible treatment. The price of our freedom from death was Jesus dying on a cross. The gift in our freedom is the promise of life eternal with Jesus in glory. Because God raised him from death to life we too shall be raised.

Jesus has turned our mourning into dancing! But let us be about leading others to the same joyous freedom we have in Christ.

As I close this sermon, I want us to take a moment to honor the men and women, who, over the years have also sacrificed so much so that we might have freedom here in the United States. I found this YouTube video with the song so many of us love - "Hallelujah" - but it is written for our soldiers – past and present. Let's watch and listen and give thanks for those who have served and fought for our freedom and for the thousands who are actively serving right now in many places.

I will warn you some of the pictures are hard to see. But remember, our freedom came with a high price. Patrick Henry said, "give me liberty or give me death." Many were given death so that we might have liberty.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=msYPbjFC50w&t=34s>

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