

SERMON TITLE: "The Gospel of Freedom: Freedom from Limitations"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 9:27-34
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 23, 2017, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Tuesday, I was at a meeting where one of the speakers was Julee Smith, the Executive Director of YCC, Your Community Connection. YCC wasn't the main topic on the agenda, so Julee only had a few minutes to speak to our group. But she caught my attention quickly when she handed out a red, white, and blue flyer decorated with fireworks and the Statue of Liberty. Attached to the paper flyer was a similarly-decorated refrigerator magnet. YCC created this publicity to announce their July "Freedom Campaign" to "liberate all victims of domestic violence and sexual assault." They're using this month in which we Americans reflect on liberty to remind us "of the women, children, and men trapped in cycles of abuse" and to entice the public to join their "freedom team." YCC wants us to donate to their cause so they can provide "education, safe living quarters, support services, and counseling," so that those suffering from abuse "can heal, develop healthy relationships, and start their bright futures."

YCC's "Freedom Campaign" sounds a lot like our church's July sermon series on "The Gospel of Freedom." Since the beginning of this month, we've been working our way through Matthew chapter nine and reflecting on all the different ways that Jesus did and does liberate those who put their faith in him. Already, we've considered how Jesus can give freedom from paralysis, freedom for mercy, and freedom for life. Today, as we continue on in Matthew nine, I invite you to consider with me how Jesus offers freedom from limitations.

1—BEGIN WITH THE BIBLE STORIES

Let's begin with the Bible stories. In verses 27-31, we read about Jesus' encounter with the two blind men. They cried out to him for mercy and followed him into someone's house. Jesus asked them if they believed he was able to do what they asked. When they said, "Yes," Jesus touched their eyes and

said, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.” And then their eyes were opened. In merciful love, Jesus offered freedom from the limitation of blindness that prevented them from leading a full life.

I have to say that these particular blind men had less limitations than some of the people Jesus healed. Even though they were blind, they were *men*, so, they had inherently better status and opportunities than, say, the woman and the girl in the stories Matthew told just prior to this. And, if you read these verses carefully, you see that the two blind men weren’t confined to a bed. And they weren’t just sitting alongside the road, by a pool of water, or at the temple gate like some other gospel characters did. The two blind men were mobile. Verses 27 and 28 tell us that they “followed” Jesus, and they “came” to Jesus at the house. Matthew doesn’t fill in the details of how they got around. Did they have assistants who led them by the hand? Were they quite adept at using a walking stick and navigating by the sounds of other people? However they did it, the two blind men already had some skills and resources. But still, life was incredibly difficult, and they felt bound and restricted by their blindness. They wanted to be able to do more. They wanted freedom from their limitations.

In Matthew 9:32-34, we see the story of Jesus’ encounter with a man who was mute. While that sounds like a problem of the vocal chords, it could have been much more. The late first-century gospel writer tells us that the man was possessed by a demon and that, once Jesus had cast out the demon, the man gained his ability to speak. Today, we would describe the cause of his situation quite differently. Maybe we’d say that he had some kind of chronic laryngitis. Maybe we’d say that he had throat cancer. Maybe we’d say that he’d had a stroke. Maybe we’d say that he’d been affected by profound psychological trauma. Whatever we’d say today, though, we’d agree with Matthew that the man was quite sick, and that his inability to speak severely interfered with his life. Whatever was restraining his communications was probably also impeding his family and community relationships and his ability to earn a living.

While Matthew used active verbs in regard to the two blind men who were able to “follow” and “come” into the house where Jesus was, Matthew uses a passive verb in verse 32 to tell us that this mute man “was brought to” Jesus. His limitations were great enough that someone else had to do the work of getting him there. That could mean a friend or family member persuaded him to go to Jesus and walked alongside him for moral support. Or, it could mean that the “demoniac who was mute” was suffering so incredibly much that he was physically taken—by human ambulance—with or without his own consent. You’ll notice that Jesus didn’t ask this man about his faith or what he wanted done. This was a spiritual and physical emergency. Others plus Jesus took control of the situation and acted to release the man from the demonic problem that caused him to be mute. And because they did, “the one who had been mute spoke.” He gained freedom from his limitations.

2—FREEDOM FROM LIMITATIONS TODAY

Wow! These are great stories. But what do we make of them today? How do we apply these stories to our own lives? We might be able to muster up enough faith to believe that Jesus did such healings 2000 years ago, but what is Jesus able to do for us now? Dare we believe that Jesus can speak the word or touch us in such a way that our limitations are diminished and even vanquished? Can we really believe the lyrics we sing, that our “chains are gone;” we’ve “been set free”?

Well, yes . . . and no. And, well, no . . . and Yes! Let me address the downside first. I think we all understand that no matter how much we’re healed, no matter how much we’re lifted up out of troubles, no matter how much our resources and opportunities are expanded, we’ll always have some limitations. That’s what it means to be human. We’re finite creatures. If we overcome one handicap or disease, then we’ll die later from something else. Last week we read about the girl that Jesus raised from the dead. That’s amazing and wonderful. But there’s no follow-up story to tell us how things went for her after that. Since there’s no proclamation that she lived forever, we have to assume that she eventually died later like all the rest of us. This side of heaven, there’s no escaping that reality.

But just because we'll all die *someday* doesn't mean that we want it to happen before it's necessary. And I don't think too many of us want to suffer any more than we have to along the way. As much as it's human to die, it's also human to want to live as fully and well as we possibly can. And that means we'd like to break free of *many* of our limitations.

Of course, there are some limitations that're helpful to us. We call those positive limitations *rules, laws, covenants, promises, and self-discipline*. So, when we proclaim a gospel of freedom, we're not talking about freedom from those positive limitations that give our lives necessary structure, shape, and meaning. We're talking about the kinds of limitations that keep us in bondage, whether they be burdens of the body, sicknesses of the soul, or conditions of the community. We're talking about those diseases, prejudices, addictions, and powers that hold us back and keep us down.

It's from those negative, life-destroying limitations that Jesus offers us freedom. And—Yes!—it's without a doubt that the compassionate and merciful response of Jesus and his followers is to help ourselves and others break free from bondage whenever possible.

That's why, last Sunday evening, our church hosted the Imani Milele Children's Choir from Uganda. We fed them dinner, interacted with them positively, enjoyed their concert, donated offerings, and bought their handicrafts in order to help those children break free from poverty, illiteracy, and disease.

Coincidentally, it was that same desire to break free from limiting factors that caused a United Methodist pastor from Kenya to show up at our church on Thursday morning. Rev. Tom Ubungu is traveling in the United States seeking partner congregations to help him finance a school for needy children in Kenya. He said his school especially helps girls, whose poor families often send their sons to school but not their daughters. His "Connect with a Child" ministry is also involved in providing wells in communities where there is no clean water. A nearby well frees a community from deadly waterborne diseases and frees up valuable time to be spent on education and other work.

The Christian belief in a gospel of freedom from limitations is also why, on Thursday afternoon, Sylvia Brooks went with me to visit Shirley Whittier, at Apple Village Assisted Living, where Shirley is recuperating from a hip replacement. It wasn't easy for Sylvia to get down the stairs of her home and out to the car. Sylvia has had hip problems of her own, and she suffers from high blood pressure in her lungs, so it was challenging to walk the long distance from the car to Shirley's room. But, in these weeks when Sylvia's daughter is gone to Europe and Sylvia was pretty much stuck at home, she was glad to gain some freedom to get out and go visit someone else who was even more limited than she. And I know Sylvia's very grateful to Steven Loy who picked her up and brought her to church last Sunday and today. We Christians make these efforts because we believe in a gospel of freedom from limitations.

CONCLUSION

Limitations can be anything that hinders us in life. Blindness and the inability to speak can be physical in nature, or they can be metaphors for the emotional fears that keep us from seeing beyond our own narrow perspective or speaking up in defense of those who are weak and in need of an ally. In order to gain freedom from our limitations, we need to seek out Jesus the healer. We need to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" "Whom would Jesus love?" "Where would Jesus go?" "Whom would Jesus touch?" "For whom would Jesus advocate?" "How can we help ourselves and others break free from limitations?"

This gospel-of-freedom ministry wasn't easy for Jesus. Matthew 9:34 tells us that the Pharisees accused Jesus of casting out demons by the power of the ruler of the demons. For a guy who wanted nothing more than to touch and empower people with the loving mercy of God, that criticism had to hurt. No doubt, Jesus had to offer himself a little freedom too—freedom to ignore the naysayers, freedom to care about the needy, and freedom to rise to the potential God had given him, even in the face of danger. May it be so with us, too. May all that we say and do be signs of God's power and desire to offer freedom from limitations.