

Breaking Free

2020 March 08

Genesis 12:1-4a

John 3:1-17

“The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”
(John 3:8)

Theme: How does faith in Christ enable us to break free from the restrictions of a personal and social nature that keep us from living the way God intended for us?

Some time ago I had a period of study leave at a seminary in the San Francisco area. On a Sunday during that period I attended Glide United Methodist Church in San Francisco, and I was greatly impressed.

I was impressed by the music in the service,
the joy of the worship,
the great diversity of the congregation,
how crowded the sanctuary was
on an ordinary Sunday in January.

But most of all what impressed me was the fact that that church was doing so much to change the lives of people in the congregation and its surrounding community.

A theme song at Glide Church was “Breaking Free.”
And they sang about how their faith had enabled them
to “break free” from so many things.

Since I had spent the morning walking through the skid row streets that surrounded the church the concept of “breaking free” from poverty, from homelessness, from addiction, stood out clearly in my mind. And I was impressed by the remarkable things that were happening at that church to help people “break free” from such restrictions in so many ways.

- But it seems to me that the things that confine and restrict most of us are far more subtle than those that stood out so dramatically in a seedy part of San Francisco.

Some of us, of course, will struggle with addictions to alcohol to prescription and other drugs; those kinds of addictions can affect anyone in any social situation.

But there are other patterns and attitudes that can confine any of us

and keep us from living the life that is intended for us.

- And in that context we can learn a lot from Abraham, and from Nicodemus.

- Genesis chapter 12 begins with:

- “And God said to Abram, go ...” and he did go, and that began the whole process of the drama of salvation that is the foundation of our faith.

That call of God to Abraham and Sarah meant that they had to leave behind tradition, the beliefs and customs of their region, the security of the familiar, and head out into the unknown.

They had to burn their bridges, become exposed to a wider world that was sometimes dangerous, often hostile, and always uncertain.

- But they were given a promise that God would be with them, and that through them God would work to create a people of faith who would be a blessing to all the world.

That willingness to venture out, to risk that journey to trust that God would be with them in the journey, made Abraham and Sarah the biblical models of faith.

- In the reading from John’s Gospel we see a different model.

- Nicodemus is a faithful Jew, politically powerful and religiously correct, highly educated and eager for information.

Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born anew.

And Nicodemus doesn’t understand.

It’s not that the image was foreign to him;

the term “reborn” was often used whenever a Gentile converted to Judaism.ⁱ

But Nicodemus doesn’t see how to be “born anew” could apply to him.

His credentials were already in place. He was unable to see any need for “rebirth.”

His fixed standards and certainties left no room for the movement of the Spirit.

- “The wind blows where it chooses,” Jesus said,

- “...but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.

- So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

- That was too much for Nicodemus.

- Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night and leaves by night, the darkness continues to engulf him as he fails to respond to the call of the Spirit.

- Abraham and Sarah ventured out in faith, not knowing what was ahead, yet trusting that God would be with them in the journey.

- Nicodemus stayed put, and missed the freeing grace of God that was offered to him.

- For us the call of Christ means that we don't have to remain captive to conventions that confine our living. The Christian life calls us to "break free" from all those things that prevent us from the life that is meant for us, the life that reflects the way of God in this world.

- What confinements might those be?

What are the barriers that hold us back from living the faith in our day?

We would each have to answer that for ourselves.

One thing that come to my mind is: Forgiveness:

Sometimes when we have been hurt by another we have a terrible time letting go of the sense of hurt. When someone has offended us – deliberately or not – and no apology is offered – or even considered, apparently – then it is so hard to move on from that event.

The hurt can become so big a factor in our lives it's like a huge weight on our backs.

Resentments can be terribly confining. And learning to let go can be terribly hard.

But Lewis Smedes writes:

"The first, and often the only person
to be healed by forgiveness
is the person who does the forgiving..."

When we genuinely forgive, we set a prisoner free
and then discover that the prisoner we set free
was ourselves."ⁱⁱ

Somehow we need to find the grace to let that hurt go so we can move on to a much broader life that is meant for us.

- Another confinement that is close to home for me is frugality.

I grew up in a family that was very frugal - and it had to be.

My father always felt relieved that he had been able to keep his job throughout the depression years. But with three children to raise and a wife who was not allowed to work outside the home, money was limited.

And in the early years there was a war on,
some things were scarce.

(I remember an amazing day
when Dad came home

with a carton of Neilson's Jersey Milk chocolate bars!

How he came by them I don't remember; you couldn't get them in the stores.)

Life wasn't that hard – most of the families in our neighbourhood

were much the same. But we all learned to be frugal - we had to be.

But the years go by and things change; and many people of my generation

hang on to that once necessary frugality long after the need for it has diminished.

So we hang on to our tax savings and investments just in case something terribly costly comes up and we might not have enough.

There is a place for frugality of course,
and recent economic volatility certainly raises that,
but I wonder if by holding onto it so tightly blocks us
from the grace of generosity; from the gift of giving – and spending
– and simply living with generous and happy hearts.

Breaking free means learning to set aside the things that hold us captive
to what we are used to and learning to be open to the ways
– perhaps different ways – that God is trying to get through to us.

• The Benedictine nun, Joan Chittister writes:

Learning to open the heart requires first that we open our lives. ...The man who has never worked with a woman as a peer, better yet as an executive, has deprived himself of the revelation of the other half of the world. The comfortable contemplative who has never served soup at a soup kitchen, or clerked in a thrift shop, or spent time in inner-city programs, lives in an insulated bubble.

The adult who has never asked a child a question and really listened to the answer is doomed to go through life out of touch and essentially unlearned.

... God comes in every voice, behind every face, in every memory, deep in every struggle. To close off any of them is to close off the possibility of becoming new again ourselves.¹

• The poet, T.S. Eliot
wrote a series of verses called:
“Ole Possum’s Book of Practical Cats.”

Those poems have been around for a long time
and they are great fun to read.

But then, not too long ago, Andrew Lloyd Webber
took Eliot’s poems and put them to music and made them into the hit Broadway
musical, called, simple, “Cats.”

That musical is absolutely delightful, full of zestful, playful actors
made up to be cats, bouncing and leaping all over the stage
as they belt out their songs.

One of the songs is about “Jellicle Cats”- some special breed of cat that can do almost
anything. One of the verses goes like this:

“When you fall on your head
can you land on your feet?
Can you find your way blind

¹ Chittister, Joan, —from *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light*,

when you're lost on the street?"

And then the chorus keeps repeating:

"Because Jellicles can and Jellicles do
Jellicles can and Jellicles do..."

Now I suspect that neither T.S. Eliot nor Andrew Lloyd Webber meant their creative efforts to be any more than simple good fun and good entertainment.

But in a strange, and whimsical way, I think "Jellicle Cats" are a perfect model for people of faith. For you see, the thing about Jellicle Cats is that they both can, and do, do all sorts of amazing things... including falling on their head and landing on their feet and finding their way blind when lost on the street.

- The story of our faith began when a couple of people named Abraham and Sarah decided that they could and would respond to the call of God to let go of the comforts and securities of their time and situation and venture out on a journey of faith.

It is because Abraham and Sarah left a country that God was able to create a people.

Those who are spiritually their sons and daughters are those who in our day will take the risk – like Jellicle Cats – to live the lively, responsible life of faith.

Rev. Bill Shank

ⁱ Whole People of God, Mar 3/96

ⁱⁱ Yancey, Philip. What's so Amazing about Grace, p. 100.