

FREE TO LIVE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

1 Peter 2:19-25
John 10:1-10

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TEXT: 1 Peter 2:24 “Jesus Christ himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to receive from Christ’s dying and rising power that enables us to live as God intends for us to live.

Here is one of the great mysteries of our faith: the death of Jesus means life for us. This is what Peter was declaring in the passage we heard from his first letter: that somehow, his undeserved death at the hands of sinners releases us from the bondage of our own sins, and that his obedience makes it possible for us to live as God wants us to live.

We may be offended to learn that Peter originally was addressing Christians who were slaves. The verse before the verses we heard reads: “Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle, but also those who are harsh.” (1 Peter 2:18) He was advising them to follow the example of Jesus, who did not resist when he was abused, and remained righteous even though he suffered unjustly. Peter most likely realized that directly confronting the injustices those slaves were experiencing would not only subject the slaves to more suffering, but would also lead to more maligning of the fragile Christian movement. This is one of those passages in the Bible that can’t be allowed to stand forever as it originally stood. No doubt slave owners throughout history used this text to teach their slaves the “right” way to put up with the worst kinds of abuse. But we know better. The fact that owning slaves was accepted in Biblical times does not mean that Biblical faith endorses slavery down through the ages. The enduring truth is this: if Christ’s death frees us to live as God wants us to live, to live for righteousness, then we are free through Christ to fight for what is right.

The best way to explain how this works is to see it in the life of a person, and I have such a person in mind this morning. The woman whom the world knows as Sojourner Truth was born a slave named Isabella in upstate New York around 1797. Isabella’s mother was her best teacher. She was a devout Christian, and passed the faith on to her daughter. She taught Isabella always to obey her master, no matter what. She probably used the passage we heard this morning to back up her teaching. When Isabella and her brother were still young, her other took them outside one night and said, “Children, there is a God who hears and sees you. When you are beaten, or

cruelly treated, or fall into trouble, you must ask God to help you, and he will always hear and help you.” Isabella never learned to read or write. Because her first owners were Dutch, she did not even learn English until later in life. But she gained an extraordinary grasp of scripture which began with her mother’s lessons. Throughout her young life, Isabella was deeply devoted to Jesus, and tried to be the best slave she could be. As a teenager, Isabella was badly treated by some English-speaking masters because she didn’t understand their orders. Even so, she tried so hard to please her owners that other slaves teased her for being too obedient.

But if Isabella had continued to passively accept her lot, the world would never have known her as Sojourner Truth. She did, finally, escape from slavery, after her master broke a promise he made to free her. And when her son was sold to a slave owner in Alabama, Isabella sued the owner to have him brought back, under a New York law that forbade out-of-state sales of slaves. She won that suit, and became the first black person in this country to win a case in court.

Some years after gaining her freedom, Isabella moved to New York City, where she became well known for her vigorous preaching and passionate reciting of scripture from memory. Isabella’s life was even more deeply shaped by her faith in God than it was by her upbringing as a slave. That may be the best way to understand the counsel that Peter gave those first-century Christian slaves. He could have meant: “Don’t let the circumstances of your life define your life. Because of Christ, you are free to live as God wants you to. No power in heaven or on earth, no amount of oppression or suffering, can take that freedom from you unless you give it up.”

In 1843, Isabella decided to become a traveling preacher, and on the road out of the city, she heard God call her by a new name. From then on, she was “Sojourner Truth,” God’s pilgrim searching for the truth. Along the road of her preaching ministry, she met some of our country’s greatest opponents of slavery, and became a leader in the cause of abolition. Through the antislavery movement, she became involved in the women’s rights movement. In those days, men did most of the public speaking in favor of (and against) women’s rights. Sojourner’s first speech for women’s rights was at a convention in Akron, Ohio, when she got up to oppose three ministers who had been using the Bible to justify women’s inferior status. “If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down,” Sojourner said, “then all of these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again.”

Although Sojourner devoted the rest of her life to serving the cause of justice

for women and African slaves, she was first of all and most of all a Christian. From her mother's teaching that God heard her and would help, she gained courage and confidence to stand up for what was right, no matter what suffering her stand might bring her along the way. "I think of the great things of God," she once said, "not the little things."

I think of Sojourner's life as a human embodiment of Peter's advice to follow Jesus' steps. Her witness reminds us that Jesus suffered not because he surrendered himself to evil people, but because he surrendered himself to God. In making that surrender, Sojourner entered the mystery by which Jesus frees us to live for righteousness. But it can be a dangerous thing for us to make too much of such a towering figure of faith because we assume we don't have what Sojourner had to do what she did. We don't have her command of scripture, her courage, her conviction. We certainly don't have her life experience. Therefore get to sit on the bench while the real Christian heroes champion righteousness.

Is that so? If God could call an illiterate slave who spoke English as a second language to stand up for righteousness in a slave-based society, then what might there be about any of us which would cause God to say, "Oh, I couldn't use that person. She doesn't have . . ." – Have what? "Oh, I wouldn't call that one to courageous service. He's too . . ." – Too what? Here's the thing we must keep in mind when it comes to righteous living. It's not because of something about us that we are free to live for righteousness. It's because of something about God. The great mystery of our faith is that we are free from sin because Christ bore our sins on the cross. By his wounds, we experience healing. Through his broken life, wholeness becomes our inheritance. And by faith alone, and certainly not by anything we come by on our own, do we participate in Christ's risen life, in which our lives are conformed to his righteousness.

When Sojourner's mother assured her that God would hear and help her whenever she asked, she may have used the Psalm of the Shepherd, the twenty-third Psalm, to make her point. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; my cup overflows." Those are wonderful words, powerful words, words that certainly have sustained many of us in our lonely walks through shadowed valleys. But Sojourner did not turn the Psalm's assurance into private property. In her confidence in God's care, she found freedom to live for righteousness.

When Jesus identified himself as the gatekeeper for the sheep, the one who would lead us to good pasture, he said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." What all who have followed him are always learning is that our personal lives cannot be truly abundant so long as the lives of others are deprived of justice and dignity. The same Shepherd who leads us to green pastures and still waters also leads us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Jesus' surrender to God was for the sake of others, for your sake and my sake. Sojourner's surrender to God pushed her past private salvation into a Christ-centered passion for righteousness in American society.

The victory that is Easter certainly has an enormous impact on our individual lives. His victory over sin and death opens the way for each one of us personally to receive complete forgiveness of sins and marvelous fullness of life, indeed, eternal life. But we miss the full power of Christ's resurrection if we apply it only to our individual salvation, our personal relationship with God. Christ's dying and rising frees us to live for righteousness, to live the way God designed us to live. If that design is perfected in Jesus Christ, then following his example means living for others. If goodness and mercy follow us all our days, then we want that same goodness and mercy to bless all God's beloved children. If we, through the love of Jesus and not by our own merit, have been made right with God, then we naturally will want and work for rightness for all people.

This is the move Sojourner made: not to be satisfied with her own freedom, but to work for freedom for others. Not to be content with her own salvation, but to give herself for a wider salvation, and to grasp what Jesus embodied: that salvation is for body and soul, that it will not be accommodated with oppression, and that it transforms society as much as it redeems persons. We are, through the death of Jesus, free from the power of sin, not only over our personal lives, but over the way the world is put together. We are, through the death of Jesus, free to live for righteousness, not only to embrace a personal righteousness, but to seek righteousness in a world filled with strife and injustice. The powers of sin and death threw everything they had at the powers of grace and life as Jesus hung on the cross, and Jesus won the battle. Now it is for us to live the peace and the freedom that was accomplished through his victory and to share his life with the world he still loves.