
A Slave, a Rabbi, and Freedom

**A sermon by the Rev. Julia Mitchener
Proper 28 – Year A**

On March 23, 1849, a 3 feet long by 2 feet wide by 2 feet 8 inches deep wooden box was shipped from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA. Many other pieces of cargo made the exact same journey that day, but what set this particular crate apart was its contents. Rather than the usual dry goods, this box held a human being. Henry, aka “Box,” Brown was a slave who had worked for many years in a Virginia tobacco factory. His wife and children lived on a nearby plantation. One day, though, Henry got word that his family had been sold to a slaveowner in North Carolina. He made it out of the factory and into the streets just in time to bid an agonizing farewell to his loved ones as they began their dreadful journey south.

Brown was disconsolate for months before resolving to escape slavery and seek reunion with his family. So it was that he found himself climbing into that wooden crate early that March day and being loaded onto a railroad car by several white sympathizers. Brown traveled with only a canteen of water and a couple of biscuits for sustenance. His box had an air hole and was marked with the words “This Side Up” in large letters. Naturally, though, the box got upended many times during the 27-hour journey via rail, steamboat, ferry, and delivery wagon. Brown later said that, at one point, “I felt my eyes swelling as if they would burst from their sockets; and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head.” Though he eventually arrived safely in Philadelphia, greeting his rescuers with an unceremonious “How do you do, gentlemen?”—though he eventually arrived safely in Philadelphia, Henry Brown confessed there had been numerous times during his journey when he was sure that he would die.

Human beings will go to great lengths to be free. History is chock full of examples of both groups and individuals who have sacrificed much for their liberty and that of others. We honored many of these brave souls here in the United States on Veterans Day this past week. The Bible, that great sacred document of our faith, is a huge collection of stories of countless others who have yearned for freedom. The most obvious of these, of course, are the stories of the ancient Hebrews being brought out of captivity in Egypt into the Promised Land. If you look closely, though, you’ll see that the writings of the New Testament are all really stories about people seeking freedom, too—freedom from sin, sickness, isolation, condemnation, poverty, misunderstanding, despair. Stories like that of the hemorrhaging woman who pushes her way through a crowd just so she can touch Jesus’ hem; or that of the disgraced son who dares to slink his way home so he can eat something other than pig slop; or that of the Roman centurion, who, despite his status as an outcast in the eyes of faithful Jews, risks asking Jesus to come to his home to save his dying servant; or that of the Ethiopian eunuch begging Philip to explain Holy Scripture to him; or those of the innumerable individuals possessed by demons who flock to Jesus for relief . . . there are endless New Testament stories about people seeking liberation from whatever it is that binds them.

And then there is this morning’s gospel lesson. On the surface, the “parable of the talents” doesn’t really look like a story about freedom; it looks like a story about using our resources wisely, about being good stewards of the gifts God has entrusted to us. A master leaves three slaves in charge of his finances when he heads off on a trip, Jesus tells us. The first two slaves take the substantial sums that have been given them and double their money; the third one, though, hides the comparatively modest amount he’s received. When the master returns, he is furious with this third slave and decrees that he should be thrown into the outer darkness.

In the traditional reading of this parable, Jesus is the master urging us not to hoard our resources, not to hide them away, but, rather, to multiply them for the building up of God’s Kingdom. Obviously, this is an incredibly useful interpretation of this story for stewardship campaigns, for UTO Sunday, or for when it comes time to

recruit people to serve as Sunday School teachers, ushers or members of the altar guild. Faithful followers of Jesus, this interpretation implies—faithful followers of Jesus don't squander the treasures with which we've been entrusted. When God gives us a gift, we seek to yield a good return on that investment.

There's nothing disastrously wrong with this reading of the parable of the talents—it's a compelling one, in many ways—quite useful, as I said, in helping to balance a church budget or marshal volunteers. It does present a few challenges, however. For starters, it portrays Jesus as a sort of tyrant and, us, God's children, as people who serve God not out of love, but out of fear and a sense of duress. It's hard to imagine the first two slaves actually wanting to work so hard for someone who, the story makes clear, is a pretty ruthless individual. Then there's the issue of the third slave, the guy who gets handed a bum deal to begin with—only one talent—then is condemned because he's afraid to let go of what little he has.

Who wants a God who operates like that? Not I. Not any of us, I suspect. Which brings us to another possible reading of this morning's gospel.^[1] What if Jesus isn't the master in this story? What if Jesus isn't the master? What if the master is simply that—a master, a slaveholder—someone who dominates and oppresses others in order to maintain his own position in life? What if Jesus tells his followers this parable not to issue a warning—a warning about what may happen to people who squander their resources, slaves who fail to obey their masters—what if Jesus tells his followers this parable not to issue a warning but, rather, to extend an invitation? An invitation to come and live in a world free of slaves and masters, a world in which one's resources—one's possessions, one's achievements, one's status—are not the end-all, be-all of human existence? What if Jesus tells us this story to remind us of the liberty he has given us to choose another option? The option not to buy into the narrative that says that the goal of life is to double, triple, or quadruple our resources—to make ourselves, or those whom we serve, ever richer, stronger, more popular, more powerful, more admired, more secure. What if Jesus tells us this story to remind us that we have an option, instead, to live according to Jesus' strange economy in which the poor, the meek, and the persecuted are the ones who are blessed, that kingdom in which losers are winners and the weak are strong? What if Jesus tells us this story to remind us that we have the option to be like the third slave, who, in essence, says to his master, *You know what, the jig is up. I'm not gonna play this game anymore. I'm not going to spend my entire existence propping up a system that holds me down. I'm not going to work for the benefit of my oppressor. Instead, I'm going to opt out. I may fail in the attempt; I may die. But I'm not going to stay a slave to that which threatens to crush me. I'm going to risk doing the one thing that just might set me free, crazy and dangerous though it may be. Like Henry Brown, I'm going to risk my old life so that maybe, just maybe, I might get a new one.*

What is the new life to which God may be calling you and me this day, and what enslavements are keeping us from it? What tired old ways of being and doing are we ready to opt out of in order to lay hold of what Jesus terms "the life more abundant" or what the apostle Paul calls "the life that is really life"? Maybe it's a debilitating fear—fear about our health, about our children, about our country or our world. Perhaps it's suspicion of "others," those people of a different race or national origin or who hold different political or religious beliefs than we do. Maybe it's an obsession with a bottom line that, while it lines our pockets quite nicely, is costing us enormously in our relationships, our personal well being, our sense of integrity and purpose. Maybe it's a long-standing grudge against a family member, neighbor, or colleague. Maybe it's an addiction or anxiety, a sense of our own fundamental inadequacy, or crippling guilt over something we have done wrong. Whatever is holding us captive—whatever it may be—Jesus, the great liberator, offers us a way out, even from the most impossible of situations. He offers us release. He wants us to be free. Breaking free, as Henry "Box" Brown discovered on his long and arduous journey back in 1849, will not be easy; it will not be without pain and risk. In return for refusing to cooperate with the forces that bind him, the third slave in this morning's gospel pays a dear price. This is also what happens to Jesus, you will recall—because he does not play the game as established by the powers that be, because he does not allow himself to be enslaved to the forces of domination and oppression, they kill him. There are fates worse than death, however. There is also more than one way to live.

Some time ago, I read about a rabbi, Michael Weisser, who had received a bunch of threatening phone calls from a man named Larry Trapp. Trapp was the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Lincoln, Nebraska. He didn't like Jews. Rabbi Weisser got hold of this man's phone number, and, in response to the racial epithets being hurled at him, started leaving voice mail messages for Mr. Trapp, messages that had a bit of a bite to them. Things like, "Larry, there's a lot of love out there. You're not getting any of it. Don't you want some?" Then he'd hang up. Well, one day, just as Rabbi Weisser was preparing to leave another of his snarky voice mails, Mr. Trapp actually answered the phone. Encouraged by his wife to break free from the cycle of bitterness both men were caught in, Rabbi Weisser found himself telling Trapp, "Hey, I heard you're sick and in a wheelchair. I thought you might need a ride to the grocery." To Rabbi Weisser's surprise, Larry Trapp took him up on his offer. Thus began a relationship that, over the course of several years, transformed from outright hatred to friendship and mutual respect. During this time, Larry's health dramatically deteriorated, and Weisser

and his family invited him to take up residence in their home so that they could care for him. He eventually died there, but not before both he and Rabbi Weisser knew the freedom of living differently, “outside the box,” with options, just as Henry Brown did almost two hundred years before. May you and I know this freedom, too. Amen.

^[1] This interpretation is a common one among liberation theologians. For further reading, cf. Mark Davis at the Political Theology Network, Jeremy Myers at www.redeeminggod.com, and Linda Fabian Pope at www.theologicalstew.com.

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