



Freed From What? Freed For What?

TEXT
Mark 5:1–20

March 1, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

A few weeks ago, Carol and I went to see the movie *Just Mercy*. I had read the book but was still unprepared. It's the story, of Walter McMillian who was convicted of a crime of which he was innocent. We have learned, often with scientific proof, that this happens far too often in America. After decades, McMillian at last tasted freedom. It is hard not to be moved, because to be free is one of those basic human yearnings.

Tara Westover grew up in a fundamentalist Mormon family suspicious of government and medicine. They buried canned peaches in preparation for the apocalypse and rejected public education as a plot to destroy faith. But Tara wanted to go to school. She had to tell her dad, who was a most abusive man. She writes, *Dad was resting on the couch, his Bible propped open in his lap. ... I blurted out what I'd come to say: "I want to go to school." He seemed not to have heard me. "I've prayed, and I want to go," I said.*

Finally, Dad looked up and straight ahead. ... "In this family," he said, "we obey the commandments of the Lord." ... I turned to leave, but before I

reached the doorway Dad spoke again. "You remember Jacob and Esau?"

"I remember," I said. ... I did not need any explanation; I knew what the story meant. It meant that I was not the daughter he had raised, the daughter of faith. I had tried to sell my birthright for a mess of pottage.¹

What her father saw as pottage, Tara recognized as freedom. She wasn't able to enter a classroom until college, but she went to college.

Freedom is a basic human yearning. Finding freedom is all through the biblical story as people are constantly hitting the road.

Abraham leaves the life he has known and journeys to the land God will show him.

Joseph is thrown away by his jealous brothers, but there discovers who he really is in this world.

Moses leads the people through the sea, shaking the dust from Pharaoh's land behind them.

Peter, Andrew, James and John all drop their nets to follow to unknown destinations, to discover freedom along the way.

For the prodigal, he's got to leave the confines of life under

dad's roof to journey to some place to find real life — not sure where; just knows he can't find his real life here.

When Jesus rides into Jerusalem, people waved palm branches like welcoming General Washington home after the war. Freedom had come.

I could go on, but you get it. A most common yearning in the human spirit is to be free. But what is freedom and what is the source of our freedom?

Andrew Bacevich, a retired Army colonel and professor of International Relations at Boston University, has said, sometimes it appears freedom is less of "a value, a word with content and is more an incantation."²

Something like "Rock Chalk, Jayhawk." After all these years, I have no idea what that means, but I recognize it is a hymn of praise for some of you.

Freedom is a political condition, no doubt. During the colonial period, Patrick Henry urged us to throw off the tyranny of England: "Give me liberty or give me death." Apart from liberty, he said, we were left in "slavery."³

It was a bit ironic, given that over his lifetime, Henry is reported to have kept up to 80 human beings in slavery.

Sixty years later, Frederick Douglass asked, "What to the American Slave is your Fourth of July?" "It is a day that reveals the gross injustice and cruelty to which is the constant victim. ... Your celebration is a sham," Douglass declared.⁴

If Patrick Henry declared freedom is throwing off the yoke of tyranny and participating in democracy, Douglass points out that democracy must include all, or it can be a form of tyranny.

Some have argued that freedom is not about us, but rather, it's about me.

Philosopher John Stuart Mill said that we are not free unless, as he says, "over myself I am sovereign, and my choices are unencumbered."⁵ I'm only free if I can do whatever I want, Mill says. I'm not so sure about that.

Sounding a bit like Mill, John Steinbeck, in *East of Eden*, writes, "The free, exploring mind of the individual human is the most valuable thing in the world. And this I would fight for: the freedom of the mind to take any direction it wishes, undirected. I must fight against any idea, religion, or government which limits or destroys the individual."⁶

How do you understand freedom, and what is its source?

When I was growing up, on an occasion or two, I pushed the envelope with my parents, pointing out that their backward rules regarding curfew or chores or whatever were oppressive, and under their weight I was enslaved. My parents displayed a shocking lack of concern regarding my plight, to which

I very reasonably expressed a perfectly justifiable sense of outrage. To which they responded, "As long as you live in our house, you will abide by our rules."

Then I remember that day when, in the driveway, there was a car. It was a '67 Mercury station wagon with woodgrain paneling in such bad shape it would be considered totaled if it ran out of gas. But it was mine. I remember, like Abraham himself, pulling out of my driveway with my father's house in the rearview mirror, driving to who knows where, and I felt free. It's a great feeling.

I felt free, but real freedom is more than a feeling. But what is it exactly?

Freedom is political. And it is spiritual. But as I read the story of the faith, a Christian understanding of freedom stands a bit in tension with the notion that we can be free as individuals. Freedom starts with being free *from* ... from Pharaoh, from tyranny, from anything that withers human flourishing. But true freedom must ultimately be freedom *for*... for responsibility, for calling, for purpose. But mostly freedom is not something I discover; it is something we share.

Jesus left the familiar hills of Israel and crossed over, it said, to the Gerasenes. It's Gentile country, and you can tell because the place is crawling with pig farmers, something that you would never find in kosher Galilee. There he is met by a man who is possessed by a legion of demons. He howls through the

night. He lives in the cemetery; the symbolism is impossible to miss. This man is as good as dead, for the community is terrified of him, and they have cast him out. But Jesus does what Jesus does: He casts the demons out, and he leaves this man in his right mind.

What do you think the Bible is talking about when it speaks of demons? I do not believe they are ghostlike spirits that infect us with evil power. I do not believe that. But I have seen circumstances and powers that erode human thriving. In that way, poverty is demonic. Illness and fear can be demonic. Our own selfishness can be demonic. Demons are any condition that dehumanizes us, any circumstance that attacks human flourishing. Perhaps the most difficult demons are failings, both in community and in individuals. If you are like most, there have been moments in your past that you have trouble shaking.

In 1913, President Theodore Roosevelt set out with only a handful of men to explore an ink-black 1,000-mile-long tributary of the Amazon called the River of Doubt. It snaked its way through uncharted regions of the Brazilian rain forest. The risks of this journey were significant, and Roosevelt almost lost his life, which may have been the point. He was on this quest because in 1912 Roosevelt left the Republican Party and ran for President, for an unprecedented third term, in a hastily pulled together progressive party. He took "Onward Christian Soldiers" as his marching song

and told his supporters they are facing Armageddon.⁷ He was defeated, having been crushed in a three-way race by Woodrow Wilson.

Failure was not something to which the old “Bull Moose” was accustomed. That fall, Roosevelt, fearing the failure would define him, set out to chart the River of Doubt. To a family friend, Roosevelt said, “You don’t know how lonely it is for a man to be rejected by his own.”⁸

This may be the most common threat to freedom for us — a past moment, a prior circumstance that defines us, or we fear defines us, that we cannot get away from. That’s a demon.

I don’t know this man’s story, but like Roosevelt, he knows the loneliness of being rejected by his own. It’s his own neighbors who chained him and who pushed him into the tombs. He is as good as dead to his own community.

But Jesus casts the demons out, and the man, for the first time, is “in his right mind” it says. He is free — or almost free.

It’s a good place for the story to end, but it doesn’t. The people see what Jesus has done, and they are afraid. He clearly has a lot of power, and they are afraid. They ask Jesus to leave their neighborhood. He will, but first he has something to do.

The cemetery man says, “Let me come with you.” *You are the first person who has really seen the human in me. You alone have shown me mercy. You have taken the broken pieces of*

my life and made me whole. I want to come with you.

And Jesus says, “No.”

This is odd. Jesus is all the time saying, “Come and follow me.” But this is the first time that someone actually volunteers, and Jesus won’t let him. Why?

He says, “You go back to your friends.” Really? This guy has friends?

You go back to the village. You go back to those who chained you and left you to die in the cemetery. You go tell them how I had mercy on you. They never really saw you, but they can now. And the truth is, because they never really saw you, you weren’t the only one who needs freedom. So do they.

If I understand the text, it’s not enough for the man to be freed from the demons. He has to be freed for purpose, for ministry, for restoring his broken community.

He goes back to tell them that what they thought was simply an act of power was really an act of mercy. He goes back, too, because he can’t be free unless he finds his home in community.

And more than that, the neighbors want Jesus to leave them now, but later Jesus will return to the Decapolis, and there will be 4,000 who want to hear him. Where did they come from? I can’t be sure, but I think they are this cemetery man’s new friends.

Well, I have more I want to say about this, but the good news is I’m not going to say it all today. So, come back next

week, and let’s reflect on freedom as our faith teaches us. It is more than an incantation. And it seems to me, a lot of folks have forgotten about it; so we will do well to remember together. And as we do, maybe even we will be a bit more free.

¹Tara Westover, *Educated* (2018), p. 66

²Andrew Bacevich, *The Limits of Power* (2008), p. 6

³Patrick Henry, “Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death!” (1775), cited in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, ed. William Safire (1997), p. 86

⁴Frederick Douglass, “What to the American Slave Is Your Fourth of July?” *Speeches That Changed the World*, p. 227

⁵John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapter 1

⁶John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (1952), p. 151

⁷Blum, et al., *The National Experience: A History of the United States*, 4th ed. (1977), p. 542

⁸Candice Miller, *The River of Doubt* (2005), p. 14

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.