

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

Psalm 105:1-6, 23-38, 43, 45b, OT p. 556
Romans 10:12-17, NT p. 160
Matthew 18:10-20, NT p. 20

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23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.’” (Exodus 5:1) As we know, it was much harder to leave Egypt than just announcing the Lord’s message to Pharaoh. We heard that list of ten plagues that finally convinced Pharaoh that Egypt would be better off without the Israelites. When the final night came, and the people of God had put the blood on their doorposts, and the angel of death passed over their homes while entering the homes of the Egyptians, finally Pharaoh let the people go. The symbols of that night – the unleavened bread, the bitter herbs of slavery, and so forth – have survived for many centuries in the celebration of the Jewish Passover. The early Christians found parallels in the disciples’ last supper with Jesus, which according to Mark, Matthew and Luke, was a Passover meal. If you were here last April 21st, Maundy Thursday, you may remember the symbolic foods and words and actions of that meal. It is a celebration of freedom, and of the faithfulness of God.

“Let my people go!” Those words continued to sound. When the Israelites were captive in Babylon, they remembered their ancestors’ release from slavery, and looked forward to the time when they could go home to Jerusalem. Cyrus, the Persian king, did let the people go. In the last century, Jews around the world remembered the ancient words, and began to return once more to Palestine, long before there was a Jewish state of Israel.

In the United States, the eighteen- and nineteen-hundreds, some of the African slaves learned to read, and they discovered an ancient story that the white preachers hadn’t told them – a story of people who had been enslaved, for whom God had provided a leader who was able to insist, “Let my people go!” They began to see the possibilities of freedom, and to hope and work for that freedom, if not for themselves, then for the generations to come.

“Let my people go!” has been a cry for freedom throughout history and before history. It is a testimony to the hopes of poor and oppressed people everywhere. It is a challenge to the powers of evil and indifference and ignorance. It is a testimony to the faithfulness of God, who makes “a way out of no way,” and calls people to move out toward freedom.

We live in a very different world, yet we face some of the same problems. Blatant inequality still exists. People still work in very difficult situations. Our clothing is made by young people, mostly young women, working very long hours for very little pay, far from home. The shirt I was wearing on Friday was made in Thailand, and my shoes were made in China. This robe, I’m happy to say, was made in the U.S.A., and their website says their robes still are. When products are produced far away and then

shipped halfway around the globe, whether that's clothing or food or oil, we pay a price – in jobs, in pollution, in quality of life for those on the other end of the supply chain. We as members of the human family pay a price, when ignorance and indifference and greed hold some of us in virtual slavery, even if we'll never know exactly who those people are. When we're part of global system, it's hard to make choices that will set people free.

As Presbyterians, we do have some resources to help us overcome our ignorance. On the pcusa.org website, you'll find a heading for Compassion, Peace and Justice Issues. There is a lot of information about the many ways the church works to set people free around the world and here at home. The May 2011 issue of Presbyterians Today focused on the problem of human trafficking and global slavery. I've put a copy on the Mission Table. If you're interested, you may borrow it. You and I probably can't go out and free people who have been caught in this kind of situation. However, we can learn about what is happening, raise awareness of some of the problems, and support those who are able to help "let my people go."

But maybe those people and situations feel too removed from our daily life. Maybe you're in a position where you feel trapped by your work, or lack of it. "Let my people go," becomes a personal cry for freedom. In our area, we know people who are working harder now for no more pay, and probably less in actual buying power. In the mill, in offices, in schools and hospitals and courts, more work is expected from fewer people, and often in fewer hours per week. But you don't dare to complain or even to take time off that you've earned, for fear your job will go to someone else. And on this Labor Day weekend, we think of so many people who want to work or need full time work instead of part time.

Where is a modern-day Moses when you really need one? I don't know. I'm tempted to start blaming politicians and CEOs and banks and – well, you know – the usual suspects. But blaming gets us nowhere. We need to work together to understand the problems. We need to hear and tell the stories of real people who are really hurting. We need to communicate with those who make decisions that affect jobs, housing, education and so forth. (Have you ever emailed or called a senator's office?) We need to try to understand one another, which isn't easy, especially if we see the world from different perspectives.

Yet isn't that what God is calling us to do? "There is no distinction between Jew and Greek," wrote the Apostle Paul; "the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him." That isn't financial generosity, but an abundance of God's mercy and grace. We are all in this together, as the people of God. So beyond understanding the problems and advocating for fair solutions around the world and close to home, we are to share ourselves with one another. Jesus expected his disciples to seek out those who are wandering, and really go out of their way to help. He told them that they had the power to permit or prohibit actions in his name – and the responsibility to act wisely. And then the promise: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

We can't solve problems alone, not our own or our community's problems. But together, we will have the guidance and power of the Spirit of Christ, so that we may encourage one another as we face the difficulties of each day. And together, we will find reasons to give thanks.

Let my people go – out of old ways of thinking that hem us in. Let my people go – beyond limits that we impose on ourselves. Let my people go, that they may worship the One who calls us into the freedom of Christ.

This table reminds us that the way is not easy. Jesus faced far more opposition than we ever will. Yet he is here, in strength and love, to encourage us and show us the way. We come to this table together, for we are not alone. In words of Psalm 105: “Remember the wonderful works that God has done.... The Lord brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.” At this table, we are set free to live the new life in joy.

Let us pray. Eternal God, we thank you for the powerful love of Christ. Set us free to live joyfully as we work together with him. Amen.