

FORTUNE-TELLERS

Mark 10.32-44

October 18, 2015, Stewardship begins

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

“Free to serve.”

That’s the prayer the choir is leading us in this morning – make us free to serve.

And maybe that sounds a little odd. If we think of service as something we are bound to do then it might not be a matter of freedom. Obligation maybe. Or duty. Or constraint. But not freedom.

If the kind of service we are praying for is the kind that is born of freedom, then I suspect it is the kind that is unencumbered by self-conscious tallies of debt – who I owe and who owes me.

This is where I get caught sometimes. I may not be able to balance my checkbook but apparently I have a very detailed record in my head of what I owe. It’s not that I want to keep track of what you owe me. It’s that I always want to be on the plus side. I don’t want to owe anyone anything. Because that sounds like freedom to me.

Until I wake up to the reality that all our lives depend on the kindness of strangers. People we have never met make our lives possible. That coffee you drank this morning, the breakfast you ate, the car you drive, the pew you sit in, your very life – all of it is a gift. And your gifts make someone else’s life possible.

So, when we pray, “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” we aren’t praying for a better accounting system to keep track of who owes us or what we owe. We are praying for a whole new relationship with the people around us and the world -- one that tries to release us from the burden of seeing all of life as a statement of debts and, instead, frees us to live in the gratitude and generosity that actually makes life possible.

We are praying, in other words, to be free to serve.

And this still may sound a little odd. If we are free to serve, who or what could or would stop us? We are free.

We are free, of course, unless you are a woman and you feel called to serve in pastoral ministry. Then, in some places at least, you are not so free to serve.

I am proud to say that as early as 1882, this congregation ordained Ms. May Jones to serve as a pastor. Truth be told, there were folks in the congregation that were not wild about that decision and eventually she withdrew to form Second Baptist Church where she did serve as pastor. That little congregation didn't last very long but pastor May Jones, without any denominational support or recognition, went on to establish Chehalis First Baptist Church which continues to this day.

At the Evergreen Annual Meeting I was talking with a young man who grew up in a Baptist church in Indiana. When word got out that he was gay, the pastor said he was welcome to come to church but he could no longer serve that congregation in any way. "You are free to be here but you are not free to serve," they said.

So when Jim Segaar started this video project to ask people here what they are thankful for, I knew immediately what I wanted to say, "I'm thankful to Seattle First Baptist Church for giving me the opportunity to serve all the things I love about the world -- and one of those things is all of you."

Because, like May Jones or my young friend from Indiana or any of you who have been discounted because of your gender or the color of your skin or your portfolio or your educational opportunities, I have learned not to take the freedom to serve for granted. There are restrictions.

And you can walk up to any business and see a sign on the door that says, "No shoes, no shirt, no service," because there are restrictions in this world about who can *serve* and who can *be served*.

At the mindfulness event yesterday, Joel and Michelle Levey introduced us to this quote from Albert Einstein: "Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison – the prison of this delusion of our separateness, our dis-connectedness – by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures."

Because it isn't just the restrictions outside of us that brings the freedom to serve into question. It is the perceptions inside of us. It's the limitations – real or imagined – that keep us imprisoned; those internal voices that tell us we have nothing to offer or that, even if we do, it won't make any difference anyway.

One of the things I have discovered about myself is that I am less free to serve if I'm not quite sure of the outcome of my service. I want to have a pretty good idea about how things are going to turn out before I invest myself and my energy and my resources.

If only there were fortune-tellers who could predict the outcome, then I would be free to serve.

Maybe that's what the disciples were thinking in this story from **Mark 10.32-44**.

They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way. The disciples were baffled by this move, while the other followers were afraid. Taking the Twelve aside once more, Jesus began to tell them what was going to happen.

[Hallelujah! Fortune-teller Jesus is going to clear up our confusion and put our fears to rest because he's going to tell us what is happening next.]

“We are on our way up to Jerusalem where the Promised One will be handed over to the chief priests and the religious scholars. Then the Promised One will be condemned to death and handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked, spat upon, flogged and finally killed. Three days later the Promised One will rise.”

Zebedee's children James and John approached Jesus. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to grant our request.”

“What is it?” Jesus asked.

They replied, “See to it that we sit next to you, one at your right and one at your left, when you come into your glory.”

Jesus told them, “You do not know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I will drink or be baptized in the same baptism as I?”

“We can,” they replied. Jesus said in response, “From the cup I drink, you will drink; the baptism I am immersed in, you will share. But as for sitting at my right or my left, that is not mine to give; it is for those to whom it is reserved.”

[Okay, so let me get this straight: Jesus knows what is going to happen – the handing over and the mocking and the flogging and the killing and some kind of rising again – but he doesn't know how the new glorious power structure is going to turn out.]

The other ten, on hearing this, became indignant at James and John.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know how among the Gentiles those who exercise authority are domineering and arrogant; those ‘great ones’ know how to make their own importance felt. But it can’t be like that with you. Anyone among you who aspires to greatness must serve the rest; whoever wants to rank first among you must serve the needs of all.”

Somehow I don’t think that was the fortune-telling the disciples were waiting for. Maybe they were looking for some assurance that they were free to serve the world and each other because, in the end, they would have the power to control the outcome. Which, unfortunately, isn’t the way it works.

If being a servant, as poet Richard Blanco said when he was with us, is putting yourself in the service of something greater than yourself -- like that prayer of St. Francis, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace” – then I guess being free to serve must have more to do with being confident about being the instrument than being disappointed in not being the conductor.

Let me be clear. It’s probably not hard to imagine Mother Teresa as the epitome of one who is free to serve. She wasn’t keeping track of what anyone owed her. She wasn’t waiting for anyone’s permission to serve. She harbored no illusions about controlling the outcome of her service.

It is reported that, on the wall of her home for children in Calcutta, is her own version of the 10 “Paradoxical Commandments” written by Dr. Kent M. Keith for student leaders in the 1960s. This is Mother Teresa’s version:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.

**What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.
Create anyway.**

**If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.
Be happy anyway.**

**The good you do today, will often be forgotten.
Do good anyway.**

**Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.
Give your best anyway.**

**In the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.**

This is the freedom to serve I am praying for. It's the "anyway" kind. It's not the desperation of people-pleasing or working off some emotionally-acquired debt. It's recognizing that all of life is a gift and being generous anyway.

It's not waiting for permission to serve.
It's serving anyway.

It's not about hoping for the power to control the outcome.
It's moving forward anyway.

When it looks like what I have to give isn't going to be enough,
I give what I have anyway.

Because, as we were talking about yesterday, there a "ripples" in everything we do. We are connected in ways that are much deeper than we can see and we touch each other's lives in ways we cannot know. We don't ever really know how things are going to turn out. But reach out anyway.

I can't help but return to those great lines from the book of Ephesians:

"There is a power
already at work within you
that is able to accomplish
far more
than you can ask or imagine."

And today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

The opening lines “free to serve” are from the Choral Anthem by that same title by Elaine Aune. The story of May Jones is included in *Our First Baptist Heritage: 1869-1984* collected by Paul H. McClelland, pp.78-79. The original “Paradoxical Commandments” by Dr. Kent M. Keith and the adaptation attributed to Mother Teresa can be found at www.prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.

GATHERING

“God of Grace and God of Glory” ... thanks to Christopher Glenn ...

The first hymn this morning is one of my friend Elizabeth’s favorite hymns. She died just this past June and we celebrated her life here in August. But I can still see her belting out that chorus: “God of rainbow, fiery pillar, leading where the eagles soar.”

We never talked about why this hymn was so important to her.

Maybe it was the fact that it was written by Julian Rush, a United Methodist minister who spent a decade serving people living with AIDS.

Maybe it was because this hymn was written to celebrate diversity for a denominational meeting.

She cared about both those things.

But I wonder if it also was about the way Elizabeth chose to embrace the future and change. Elizabeth didn’t always like change, but she was the kind of person who could see potential in it and she knew the dangers especially when religious folks, out of fear or confusion, dig in their heels and refuse to change. So, “in the midst of new dimensions, in the face of changing ways” Elizabeth was confident in two things: (1) the Spirit that leads us forward and (2) the journey that makes us companions on the way.

Believe me, I know the future and change can be scary. But with my friend Elizabeth, I’m counting on two things this morning: the Spirit that leads us and the companions, whoever they are and wherever they are from, that join us on the way.

INVITATIONS

- Thank you to all volunteers and staff that made the Creativity Expo a couple weeks ago a highlight in our life together.
- Thanks to all those who helped us host the 500 or so folks who assembled here for the Nadia Bolz-Weber event on Tuesday and the Romney Legacy Committee and friends who helped us gather for the Levey mindfulness event yesterday.
- You will note the other programs coming up in this bulletin ...

But I want especially to invite you to stay for lunch today after worship as Pastor Patricia Hunter leads a program titled, “Getting our finances in order to serve the world.” Every year we invite you to serve the WORLD through the gifts of your energy and financial resources. And this year, we have the opportunity to serve YOU through the financial planning wisdom of Pastor Hunter because we want to support you in being the generous person we know you want to be.

We know dealing with finances can be hard. I spent years having to dig myself out of financial disasters that make me nervous to talk about money. I have a pastor friend who says he would much rather talk to any congregation about politics or sex than to have to talk about money. When did such a big part of our life get stuck in a spiritual closet?

So it’s time to swing open those doors and have those conversations that will help us to be financially healthy as individuals and as a congregation. Please come and help us be committed to the love that serves the world.