

It is THE foundational story for our Jewish sisters and brothers. Not only does it mark the birth of the faith, but it is also the most important event in the history of Judaism. The story we just heard of the seemingly impossible escape of the Hebrews from the slavery and oppression of Egypt is not just Judaism's most important story, but it just may be the greatest liberation story in the history of the world. Throughout history, as Jews have continued to suffer one enslavement and indignity after another, they remember how God led them to freedom and they draw their strength from that. Judaism is and was and always will be founded in the concept of freedom.

I would argue that the same can be said for Christianity. When Mary becomes pregnant, she announces the reason for Jesus coming to earth and also the foundation of our tradition in that beautiful piece of prose, the Magnificat. "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things." According to Mary, Jesus comes to bring freedom to those enslaved by injustice and oppression.

As Jesus becomes a man, he himself announces why he has come, quoting Isaiah. "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free." Just as Judaism is framed by liberation and freedom, Jesus too announces that his ministry is all about liberation and freedom. Freedom is the centerpiece of both of our traditions.

It is also, of course, the foundational doctrine of our country. "We hold these

truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness...We therefore...do, in the name and by the authority of the good people of these colonies solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE and INDEPENDENT STATES.”

The greatest moments in the history of our faith and our country have been the times when the bells of freedom were heard by those who continued to be enslaved. We see this in the Gospels when Jesus breaks the shackles of lepers, tax collectors, women and so many more, giving them access back into society. We saw it in our country when slavery was abolished and when the Civil Rights Act was passed. We have seen it bloom again in Christianity through Liberation Theology and the lifting up of the poor and the oppressed in Latin America and throughout the world.

I do not believe there is any question that the most important doctrine for both our church and our country is liberation and freedom, liberation and freedom not just for ourselves, but for every human being and every aspect of God’s creation. That is what we yearn for and that is what we are to do. Our call as Christians and as Americans is to bring freedom and liberty to all.

The difficulty, of course, is in the details. How do we best bring freedom to all? This past week all of you showed one way to do that. By being with and caring for Louise, you totally freed her of anxiety and concerns. You liberated her to take the next step on her journey.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus tells us a parable that points out another way to bring

freedom to others. A king forgives an overwhelming debt of 10,000 talents. It would take a working person in first century Mediterranean society over a year to make one talent. Obviously, he could not pay off 10,000 talents in a hundred lifetimes. Such crushing debt keeps people in chains and the only way for them to be freed is to forgive such debt. It gives people their lives back and liberates them to live full lives again. Here at St. David's, we have had the opportunity to offer such forgiveness to some people. Sometimes, that act of forgiveness is not enough to liberate someone from the other shackles in their lives. But we also know that it has literally saved the lives of others, freeing them up to live full and dignified lives once again.

Today's parable also seems to have a direct application to another crisis facing many in this country. The cost of health care in America today means that even people with good health insurance coverage can be crushed with staggering debt after facing a single illness. All of us probably know of a case when a well to do family suddenly became destitute after someone got critically ill. People without coverage have absolutely no chance. They are immediately thrown into debt just as impossible as that faced by the slave in today's Gospel.

If we really are in the liberation business, as today's readings tell us, we have a religious and a patriotic duty to solve this crisis. If we are to live into today's Gospel, we need to do more than forgive those who have harmed us. We must create a social system where no individual is ever enslaved by debt that is impossible to pay. We must free everyone facing this hopeless debt and make sure no one else is ever enslaved by it again. This should be a central priority for all of us as we make

decisions about the future, including who we vote for as our next President.

Today's parable also speaks to us about America's relationship with two thirds world countries. Just as an individual is enslaved when they are faced with debt they can never pay off, the same holds true for nations. According to today's parable, America has a moral responsibility to forgive the debt of countries that are struggling to survive.

One of the most striking examples that Jesus's philosophy works is the country of Bangladesh. In 1971, when Bangladesh was born after a war for independence from Pakistan, the country was in total political disarray. They were simultaneously fighting a massive famine. Bangladesh was the poster country for the world's worst suffering. An official in Henry Kissinger's state department famously labeled Bangladesh an "international basket case," seeing no way that this place could ever be extricated from such massive suffering and extreme poverty.

But to the surprise of nearly everyone, Bangladesh has taken its first steps up the economic ladder. Per capita income has doubled since 1971. Life expectancy has risen from 44 years to 62 years. The infant mortality rate has declined from 145 to 48.

How did it happen? Well, there are many reasons. For one, look at the tags on your clothes. Many of them are now made in Bangladesh. People have jobs. Educational opportunities have led to rising literacy rates, which has led to more independence for the women of the country, which has led to family planning and a dramatic drop in the number of children per household. But all of this began through Jesus economics. The key that opened it all was when Bangladesh was forgiven the

crushing debt they were facing as a country, just like the king does with the slave today. Such forgiveness gives people back their lives. It makes it possible for them to function and help themselves. What we are doing is liberating them so they can create their own future. At the same time, we are spreading American freedom, by allowing them to breathe on their own.

In Jeffrey Sach's book, *The End of Poverty*, he outlines a plan to eliminate extreme poverty in 25 years. In that outline, he makes it clear that recovery nearly always begins just as our Gospel says today, with the forgiveness of overwhelming debt.

Today's Gospel suggests to us a strategy for bringing economic freedom to individuals as well as countries. It has also caused me to rethink issues like "outsourcing". In our presidential campaign, both candidates have spoken of the evils of outsourcing and what they are going to do to keep all those jobs in America. But a study of the Bangladesh case and how it relates to Jesus' message of forgiveness today, shows us that this is backwards thinking. By letting those garment jobs go to Bangladesh, people there are for the first time in their lives able to make it on their own without aid from others. The same can be said for all those telemarketing jobs that have gone to India. Yes, American jobs are lost, but what does India have to get to have those jobs? New computers, new telephone equipment, more infrastructure. And where does that all that stuff come from? From us, of course, creating more jobs, and higher paying jobs here. By forgiving debt and allowing others to make their own financial way in the world, we see the results of following Jesus's bottom up economics.

People are liberated to lives of dignity.

Here is a second priority for all of us when we enter the voting booth. Which candidate is willing to forgive outstanding debt and allow countries to grow their own economies? Which is willing to risk losing some American jobs to gain more? Which is willing to liberate people in other parts of the world from their slavery so that they can become the next Bangladesh? Which is going to practice the bottom up economics of Jesus?

Maybe it does work in economics, but today's message of the link between forgiveness and freedom is certainly not what we want to hear following the anniversary of the worst terrorist event in our nation's history, is it? How can we consider forgiving what is an unforgivable act? And is that what Jesus is asking us to do in today's Gospel? Yes, but not exactly as we understand it.

You see, unlike the guilt oriented society of the western European world that all of us know so well, first century Mediterranean society and also traditional societies of that region today, find their fundamental values in the honor code. Honor in those societies is most simply public reputation. It is your status in the community and most importantly, the *public recognition* of your status. Anything that takes away your social status takes away your honor and means that you are publicly humiliated and rejected by others. The smallest slight to you or your kin must be defended at all costs, otherwise your honor is permanently lost. This is why offended people in the Middle East then and now see no choice but to retaliate. This is why so many Jewish leaders react so violently to Jesus throughout the Gospels. And as you have probably

guessed, it has much to do with why some Middle Eastern traditionalists want to destroy America.

Sin in such a society, is a breach of interpersonal relations that causes someone to lose honor. And the reason Jesus uses the analogy of money today is because debt made people poor. It took away their land, livelihood, social position. It took away their honor. Forgiving a debt or a sin restores their sense of honor. It gives them their place back in society, it allows them to return to a life of self-sufficiency. Here is what Jesus means by forgiveness. Give the other person back their self respect. That's why in the Lord's Prayer the words "sin" and "debt" are interchangeable. "Forgive us our sins/debts as we forgive others."

The forgiveness that Jesus is talking about was captured by our own Desmond Tutu in the midst of the terrible oppression and pain inflicted on so many in south Africa. "Forgiveness", he said, "does not mean condoning what has been done. It means taking what happened seriously and not minimizing it; drawing out the sting in the memory that threatens to poison our entire existence. It involves trying to *understand the perpetrators* and so have empathy, to try to stand in their shoes and appreciate the sort of pressures and influences that might have conditioned them."

Here then, is our last priority from today's lessons before we head into the voting booth. Which candidate understands the honor/shame culture? Which candidate is willing to appear weak by trying to understand the perpetrators and having empathy for their position? Who is willing to allow the perpetrators the opportunity to "save face", thereby diffusing their need to attack? Which candidate is willing to offer forgiveness

so that the other can have back their honor and regain their freedom, their liberation from shame? This is the kind of forgiveness that leads to freedom. If we want to liberate the Iraqi people, let us stop worrying about whether they adopt our version of democracy and start working on giving them back their honor.

This isn't so easy in the Middle Eastern world, because honor is seen as a limited good, meaning that if one person wins honor, another must lose it. That's why the fighting has continued for thousands of years. But as people who don't live in an honor/shame culture, we have nothing to lose when we restore someone else's honor. We can give it away and lose nothing. That is what Jesus means by forgiving and as Christians this is how we are called to spread freedom throughout the world.

Today, Jesus has given us a blueprint for spreading a liberation as powerful as that experienced in the Exodus to the entire world. We begin by forgiving crushing debt, whether that be to an individual or a nation. Second, we create social systems where no one ever again has to be overwhelmed with bills they can never pay so that a loved one can be treated for an illness. Last, let us give back honor to those people who believe we have taken it away from them, thereby restoring their dignity and taking away their reason to lash back at us. This is the forgiveness that brings the freedom of Jesus and Jefferson to all. Amen.