

The Freedom of Release

Sermon 97 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 25, 2021
Isaiah 61:1-4 & Acts 4:32-37

*If you love something, let it go.
If it comes back it's yours forever.
If it doesn't, it was never meant to be.*
-Unknown

If I were a betting woman, I would bet that most – if not all – of you know this quote well. You've probably heard it in a song, in a movie, or maybe even directly from someone who was giving you advice in a moment of despair, confusion, or loss. It is what we say to one another when a relationship is struggling or when parents are trying to figure out how to let their children grow up. It is a tragically beautiful reminder of the inseparable nature of freedom, love, and release.

It is almost counter-intuitive though, because when we love people (or things) we want to keep them close, to protect them, and perhaps to protect ourselves from the pain of living without them. But love without freedom and choice is not love at all, is it? Whether we like it or not, love renders us vulnerable.

At the same time, in that vulnerability, we are reminded that love is a gift that comes from God and that remains completely outside of our control. And often if we want to experience the fullness of love, we have to surrender everything to it, often giving up our plans, our expectations, and always releasing our ability to manage the outcome. In this way, love humbles us time and time again. Perhaps this is what Jesus was trying to teach us when he said, *those who want to find their life must lose it*. It is the same kind of paradox, at least... a re-orientation of our human nature to store up, to cling tightly, to control, and to protect.

Although we tend to think of love as an individual experience, there are numerous examples from scripture which challenge that perspective and teach us that love – free and mysterious love – is also communal.

In the beginning God creates out of love, bringing forth life from chaos; and after six days of creative work, God steps back and releases creation to dance on its own. On the seventh day God rests and watches life as it begins to live into its fullest and freest expressions.

Later this rhythm is recreated as the Hebrew people live in relationship with one another and their land. The seventh day becomes the Sabbath day, a day of rest and freedom from labor. The seventh year would be a Sabbatical year – a time for the farmland to lie fallow and for debts to be forgiven. Rest for the land and freedom for those trapped by debt. According to the book of Leviticus after seven cycles of Sabbatical years, a year of Jubilee would be observed. In the year of Jubilee freedom and release would run wild. Debts were forgiven. Land was released from its creative labor *and* it was redistributed, given back to

its original owners. Slaves and indentured servants were set free. Everything and everyone had a chance to start over, to begin again, to be freed from the ties that bound them in and to the past. Jubilee was a year of liberation and hope. Jubilee was a communal expression of love.

The spirit of Jubilee is echoed in the words of Isaiah that Jesus quotes in Luke chapter 4 saying:

*The spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me:
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;*

The spirit of Jubilee is embodied in the mission and ministry of Jesus as he travels throughout Galilee doing the work of love set free as the sick are healed, the hungry are nourished, the poor are lifted up, and the outcast are brought front and center. Jesus doesn't wait for year seven or year seven times seven, Jesus' whole life is a model of love, of freedom, of release.

The book of Acts tells the story of the early Church as it begins to organize itself to engage in mission and ministry without Jesus but very much *with* the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the church begins to grow and change, it continues to incorporate expressions of Jubilee. This time, though, it doesn't seem so much like an obligatory practice or a cyclical commitment that comes around every seven or 49 years. Instead, the spirit of Jubilee has informed the whole way of life for the early church – much like it had with Jesus.

An overwhelming spirit of freedom, release, and love consumes their life together. No one claims private ownership of property, grace consumes them all, there is not a needy person among them and those who have much sell what they have and bring the proceeds to the apostles so that it might be fully shared amongst the people. There is a counter-intuitive spirit of abundance and a shared commitment to love shown through release.

It seems the early Christians really understood the spiritual practice of release. Could it be that the act of release itself helped them understand the love of God more fully?

They say if you love something let it go.

The problem is, we love so many things and who can imagine letting them all go? And to what end? What difference would it make?

One of our sister churches in Little Rock, Arkansas has spent some time in deep, spiritual discernment about these very questions. Earlier this year Pulaski Heights Baptist, launched what they are calling a Jubilee Ministry. It's a ministry dedicated to financial relief and assistance to those in their community who are in need. (This is not their church community, their local community). Through the generous gifts of church members, average, ordinary people like you and I, the church has raised and will continue to raise

funds to be dispersed through this ministry. It is an ongoing way to proclaim release to the captives and to liberate those enslaved to cycles of poverty and debt. Together, the body of Christ at Pulaski Heights Baptist are living Jubilee.

In much the same way, five houses of worship in Central Kentucky have built a jubilee coalition set on forgiving medical debt for families and individuals in the Appalachia region. St. Michaels Episcopal Church, Central Baptist, and First Presbyterian all of Lexington, along with Union Church Berea, and Temple Adath Israel of Lexington all recognized the great and growing need. They understood that the need was greater than any one of them could meet alone and so they joined together – sharing in their resources, none claiming ownership over the gift or the outcome – and their gifts, together with a good measure of God’s grace, are bringing financial freedom to Appalachia.

Jubilee is happening in Little Rock and in Appalachia! Could it happen here too?

It is an interesting idea, love as release, love as freedom, love as liberation. Especially for people who, like us, have so much freedom already. Because of who we are, where we live, and what we do for a living, there is opportunity for financial freedom, relational freedom, social and political freedom. There is also religious freedom and freedom of speech, freedom to claim what is ours and freedom to leave a legacy, to pass things down to future generations. These are all good things. But as much as we (as a people) celebrate our freedom, I wonder if we might have something to learn from the coalition in Central Kentucky or our sisters and brothers in Little Rock, Arkansas. I wonder if the Holy Spirit might be giving us an opportunity to learn from the early church, whose story is told through the book of Acts, about experiencing God’s love in the act of release. Perhaps there, we might find a freedom we didn’t even realize we were missing.

There’s got to be something to it, this spiritual act of release, of letting go... because if God models it in the beginning, if the prophets proclaim it, if Jesus embodies it, and if the church carries it forward in every age... surely in the experience of release, of letting go of all that we think we love; surely we too experience our own glimpse of freedom.

Maybe it is freedom from privilege and power,
Maybe it is freedom from the pressure of keeping up with the Jones’
Maybe it is freedom from grief and pain
Maybe it is freedom from stress and worry

Whatever it is maybe having the courage to let go is all we need to experience the transforming power of God’s love.

And maybe, as we loosen our grip, as we let go of all the things we used to think would bring us joy and make our lives whole, we might just find that losing our life really is the way to save it.

Letting something go, really is the best way to love it.

And freedom is found not in all that we can build up, protect, and call our own... but in having the nerve to let it all go.

Perhaps freedom is found in release...

Perhaps love really is letting go...

Perhaps jubilee can indeed come to us, but even better still,
perhaps jubilee can indeed come through us.