

Sermon Series on Christianity & Human Rights

*Christianity & Human Rights 2: Human Rights and Hope*

Romans 8:12-17

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If Judaism's vision of human rights is rooted in the Exodus story of a God who sets slaves free, then Christianity's vision of human rights is rooted in the gospel story of a God who became incarnate in the form of a political prisoner who was executed by the state. For all that Christianity has far too often been used to oppress people and deprive them of their rights, we still cannot escape this central reality: that the Messiah was a man whose human rights were violated. Jesus could be the poster child for Amnesty International.

Now that raises a provocative image of Amnesty International mounting a letter-writing campaign to petition Pontius Pilate for Jesus' release! Not that I'm criticizing AI's techniques, but Jesus did something far more radical. He dealt with this injustice not by attacking or accusing those who deprived him of his rights, but by forgiving them and even inviting them to God's redemption. Because this is the astonishing reality: that the chains that bind slaves also bind their masters. God is not content only to free slaves. God is also concerned about hard-hearted Pharaohs and Roman governors. This is why God doesn't just blast the oppressors to bits like some kind of divine Rambo. Rather in Jesus God models the idea of using your own freedom in order to win the freedom of others. Using your own freedom even to the point of giving it up so that others may be free.

We've touched on this over the past two weeks. Secular human rights lay out the freedoms that we are entitled to, but they say nothing about what we should use those freedoms for. Why are we given freedom? As we've seen, it is so that we may freely choose to serve God and one another. Well, that's all very well and good as far as it goes, but it has all too often not gone much further than charity, a dutiful giving of our ten percent or less to those who are "less fortunate" than ourselves. God, whoever, has something far more radical in mind. God desires to set us free not only from the outward chains of oppression, but also the inward spiritual chains of guilt and fear, of self-centeredness and greed, those spiritual chains which trap us into thinking that the only way we can elevate ourselves is if we push someone else down.

This is what Paul spends so much time talking about in his letters. He says we need a spiritual makeover in which we re-orient our minds from worldly values of power and greed and death, to the spiritual values of life and love and reconciliation. That mission of reconciliation is key, because it's not enough for me to win if someone else loses. It's not enough to gain my freedom if someone else is enslaved. As Martin Luther King would say centuries later, we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or else perish together as fools. Reconciliation means putting someone else's welfare, their freedom, ahead of our own. It means using our freedom to serve another. It means giving not just ten percent, but one hundred percent.

It has been said that if the Old Testament is the story of God's people as freed slaves, then the New Testament is the story of God's people as free slaves. Remember that obscure passage from Deuteronomy last week, in which the only way slavery can last for life is if it's voluntary? Well, that's what we are called to do. We are called to choose slavery. But it's not slavery as the world knows it. Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 7: "Everyone should retain the place in life that the Lord has assigned to them." So if you're married, stay married. If single, stay single. If uncircumcised, stay uncircumcised, and if a slave, stay a slave. Again he fails to denounce the institution of slavery outright. But hear the deeper truth that he is

speaking of: “Were you a slave when you were called? [That is, became a Christian] Don’t let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. [So he’s not advocating an acceptance of slavery as an institution.] For whoever was a slave when called by the Lord is the Lord’s freedman; similarly whoever was free when called is Christ’s slave.” In other words, God gives ultimate power to mere slaves, power that no human master can ever take away or conquer. And those who are free now become slaves to God’s purpose and mission of the redemption and reconciliation of all humanity. Paul reminds us, “You were bought at a price; do not become the slaves of human masters.”

In the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter to the Romans, Paul continues this theme. “We have an obligation,” he says, in other words a duty. We are slaves “but not to live according to sinful nature” – whether that sinful nature is expressed through internal chains of guilt, greed, and despair, or through the external chains of oppression and abuse. “For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit, by God’s power of love and service and reconciliation rather than force – if by God’s spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, of slavery both external and internal, then you will live. And here Paul explains the liberal nature of our slavery to God. “Because those who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the spirit of adoption. And by that spirit we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’” (and remember again Jesus’ words to call no one Father or Master because we have one Father and Master who is in heaven.)

We aren’t made God’s slaves so that we will be beaten down and oppressed. Rather, we become slaves to God so that we may become God’s children, and more: God’s heirs. We inherit Christ’s suffering but also his glory, his power, his honor. A glory, power, and honor that we find in the new community that God makes possible.

This community is based on two principles. The first is obvious enough. It is the priority of love in all relationships. This takes precedence over any other rule or commandment no matter how worthy it may seem. If freedom is the basis of human rights, then love is the basis of God’s charter. This is why Jesus constantly scolds the Pharisees for holding to the letter of the law at the same time that they neglect compassion for their sisters and brothers. We are set free so that we may love. That much is obvious, and I doubt I need to say any more about it.

But the second principle on which God’s community is based is the value of diversity. This goes well beyond the lip service our modern society pays to things like diversity and multiculturalism and tolerance. It extends to a positive appreciation for all the diversity that humanity represents. It means that we can never achieve unity or community if we force people to give up that which makes them unique. It goes back to that second story of creation, where each person, created as an individual with their own name, each person in all their variety is created in the image of God. All of us, in all our diversity, must be included if our community is to be complete: male and female, Jew and Greek, slave and free. Conservative and liberal, black and white, gay and straight. Paul is at such pains to spell out how all this diversity is needed, all of it is beautiful, all of it is valuable. Can the hand say to the foot, “I have no need of you?” We each have our own gifts; we each have our own experiences, our own values, our own talents, our own beliefs, and if anyone is excluded because they are different, then our community is not complete. We each need to be able to pursue our own happiness, and allow others to do the same, in order for any of us to be truly happy. That’s why these freedoms, these human rights, are so important. Our freedom is the freedom to love and to serve, and in so doing, we are living into a reality that is not yet here.

And this is where hope enters the picture. This is one of the things that Christianity has to offer to the human rights discussion, because the reality is that all documents about human rights describe not the real world, but the world as we would like it to be. It’s a world that does not exist, and probably can never really exist. But rather than set up false

expectations, human rights are about hope: the now and the not yet. We want more than just a world where everyone is free, and not just a world in which everyone has value. More than that, we long for a world in which everyone has something of value to contribute. That's what is lost when human rights are suppressed. We lose the contributions that those people would otherwise be free to make. The tension between that perfect vision and the harsh reality would be too much if it were not for hope. Hope that in this world we catch glimpses of the possibilities. Hope that in this world, sometimes for a moment, we really are all that we have the potential to be.

The church has a lot of experience living that perfect vision in the midst of an imperfect world. But those glimpses of paradise keep us going. Those glimpses of paradise keep Aung Sang Suu Kyi going after fourteen years living under house arrest in Myanmar. Those glimpses of paradise kept Nelson Mandela going for twenty-seven years in prison. Hope is what empowers a village in Afghanistan to resist the terrorism peddlers. Hope is what empowers untouchable women in India to become trained as village nurses.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, even though they aren't self-evident at all. They are our articles of faith. They are the by-laws of our community. For none of us is free unless all of us are free. For this we were created in God's own image. And God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love, and of self-discipline. (2 Tim. 1:7)