

March 9, 2014 (1st Sunday of Lent)

TEXT: Deuteronomy 10:12-21

TITLE: Walking in God's Ways

When is a song not just a song? When it is a spiritual. It is not unusual for a piece of music to have some sort of special meaning. Couples will sometimes say, "That's our song." Kids have favorite songs they listen to non-stop for a week. And most of us at some point have had our heart broken and consoled ourselves by listening to a sad song over and over again. But spirituals are different. They are complex and powerful musical creations arising out of the unique experience of African Americans brutally compelled to live as slaves on the soil of a supposedly free land. We may have partially domesticated some spirituals into nice songs. *This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine* can be heard as just a Sunday School song for little kids. But it means much more than a kid's song when you sing about this light that you are going to let shine in a world that would forcibly extinguish any spark of hope in your slave spirit. *Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm gonna let it shine. Don't let Satan blow it out; I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine, all the time.* Spirituals gave a way for people imprisoned by the "No" of slavery to sing out a defiant, life-sustaining "Yes" of faith.

The exact origins of African slavery here in America are somewhat obscure. The first Africans were sold in Jamestown back in 1619, but probably not as perpetual slaves. By 1700, though, the status of most Africans in America was clear: they were slaves for life and their children inherited that condition.¹ What was also clear was that American law considered slaves to be "property." Slaves were no longer someone, but some thing – a thing whose value could be measured and claimed as part of someone else's personal wealth. The problem, though, was that American law also attributed a certain level of personhood to slaves. Slave owners were required to feed them, clothe them, care for them in sickness and old age, and not capriciously kill or maim them. Not that these laws were always followed, mind you – but it set up a fundamental legal absurdity: slaves were both persons and property. But as theologian James Cone has written: "The concept of property negated the idea of personhood."² To be a person is to be in control of one's destiny, to be free to make choices and to interact with others as an equal. All of that is precisely what slaves lacked.

Another preacher and theologian, Howard Thurman, took this discussion one step farther. He said that slaves were determined to *be* in a society that sought to eliminate their very *being*.³ Any positive faith that was preached on the Southern plantations emphasized the *somebodiness* of the slaves. These men and women preachers spoke about being created in God's image, not about being slaves but being God's children. They well knew that the slave life narrative included being snatched from a homeland, sold on an auction block, of enduring the brokenness when husbands were sold away from wives and children sold away from mothers. But through it all, the preachers and song leaders pointed to a God who was Lord over all field bosses and masters, and ruler over death itself.

Spirituals were a way to remember this God and to call on God to deliver God's people once more. To the God of freedom, they would sing and call on God to free them. To the God of justice, they would implore God to bring about justice in a broken land. The spirituals wouldn't explicitly name the cruel master, the vicious field boss, the heartless auction block, the evil of slavery itself. Instead they sang about bible stories that focused on how God is the God of freedom and justice. They sang about how David slew the giant Goliath, how Joshua caused the walls of Jericho to come tumbling down, how God protected Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace, how God's might clamped down the lion's jaws when Daniel was thrown in their den, and how Moses stood defiantly before mighty Pharaoh in Egypt-land, demanding "Let my people go."

Now, today's sermon is not just a history lesson. Slavery was a foundational and painful chapter in America's history, but the bitter roots of that part of our nation's family tree are still present and bearing fruit in society now. Slaves were both persons and property, and that absurd tension still exists in many ways today. People still exist in relationships that are unbalanced – unjust – even abusive. People still work in situations where they don't have true rights or a voice that matters when decisions are made. Gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual people still face prejudice in statute books, courthouses, and places of employment. Lots of people struggle with disease, but insurance and medical resources are not equally available. All children have the potential to learn and deserve quality education, but not all have access to good, safe schools. We need to ask ourselves: Have you ever felt like you were a commodity? Have you felt like someone whose value was measured solely by what you could do or earn for someone else? People are not property. That's a central message of Christian faith – the message of a God who still tells us to shout to the world's enslaving Pharaohs "Let my people go."

You are somebody. Don't let anything – anyone – any institution - try to tell you otherwise. Spirituals are one antidote to all that would dehumanize us. They were sung years ago so that sparks of humanity and personhood might not be extinguished by slavery. And once that little light was re-kindled, then the next step of faith occurred: The person could sing "I want Jesus to walk with me. I want Jesus to walk with me. All along my pilgrim journey, I want Jesus to walk with me." We affirm our personhood – our humanity as a child of God by walking.

After Moses came down from Mount Sinai and shared the commandments and law with the people of Israel, he then summarized it all in a speech found in Deuteronomy 10. He said, *So now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? God requires this. Fear the Lord your God; love God with all your heart and with all your soul. And walk in all God's ways.* That wisdom is still true for us today. Walk in God's ways, because you are a person – a child of God. You're not property – a thing owned by a slave master, controlled by an abusive relationship, by an addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling or porn, by a self-hatred that leads to anorexia or cutting, by labor laws that take away your voice and

your rights, by social prejudices that erect barriers due to your sexuality, age or marital status. You belong to Christ and you're called to walk in God's ways as God's beloved child. You are to walk away from abuse, drugs, and brokenness. You are to walk toward freedom, justice, and hope.

Moses described this walk of faith as being both personal and interpersonal. It is personal in that we are to circumcise the foreskin of our hearts. I know, that's an old and somewhat awkward image for us today. But it is pretty straightforward. Circumcise, remove, break away the stony covering around your heart. Do not be captive to fear and hatred. Set your heart free. How? Well, Moses says that one way is to love the stranger, for we were all strangers in Egypt. Many of us were immigrants into this land. Many also trace their roots to the forced immigration of slavery. In as much as we have spent time in Egypt in some shape or form, we should care for one other around us, also strangers in a strange land in some way; and then walk forward together by faith.

Someone once said being a Christian is not so much a matter of what one is as what one is becoming. A life lived in relationship with Christ is marked by a heart that is not only strengthened and expanded by the Lord, but also is open to others. Your personhood is tied to seeing and affirming others' personhood. That is why your walk by faith is always a walk in community – amidst and beside others.

So the question for each of us this Lenten season is, not who are you, but rather who are you becoming? Are you walking forward in the ways of God? If so, who are you walking with? And is there someone you can invite to church – to walk with you, to sing these spirituals of faith with you, so that the good news of Christ may offer healing and hope for them in this broken and hurting world? Think about these things – and hear again Moses' wise words: *So now, O church, what does the Lord your God require of you? Fear the Lord your God and walk in God's ways; love and serve God with all your heart and with all your soul; and love the stranger, for you too were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Finally, as you let your little light shine, and as you walk by faith becoming fully a child of God, always pray that Christ, our Lord and Savior, will guide your feet forward.

AMEN

¹ James Cone, The Spirituals and the Blues, 1972, p. 20.

² Ibid., p. 21-22.

³ Ibid., p. 16-17.