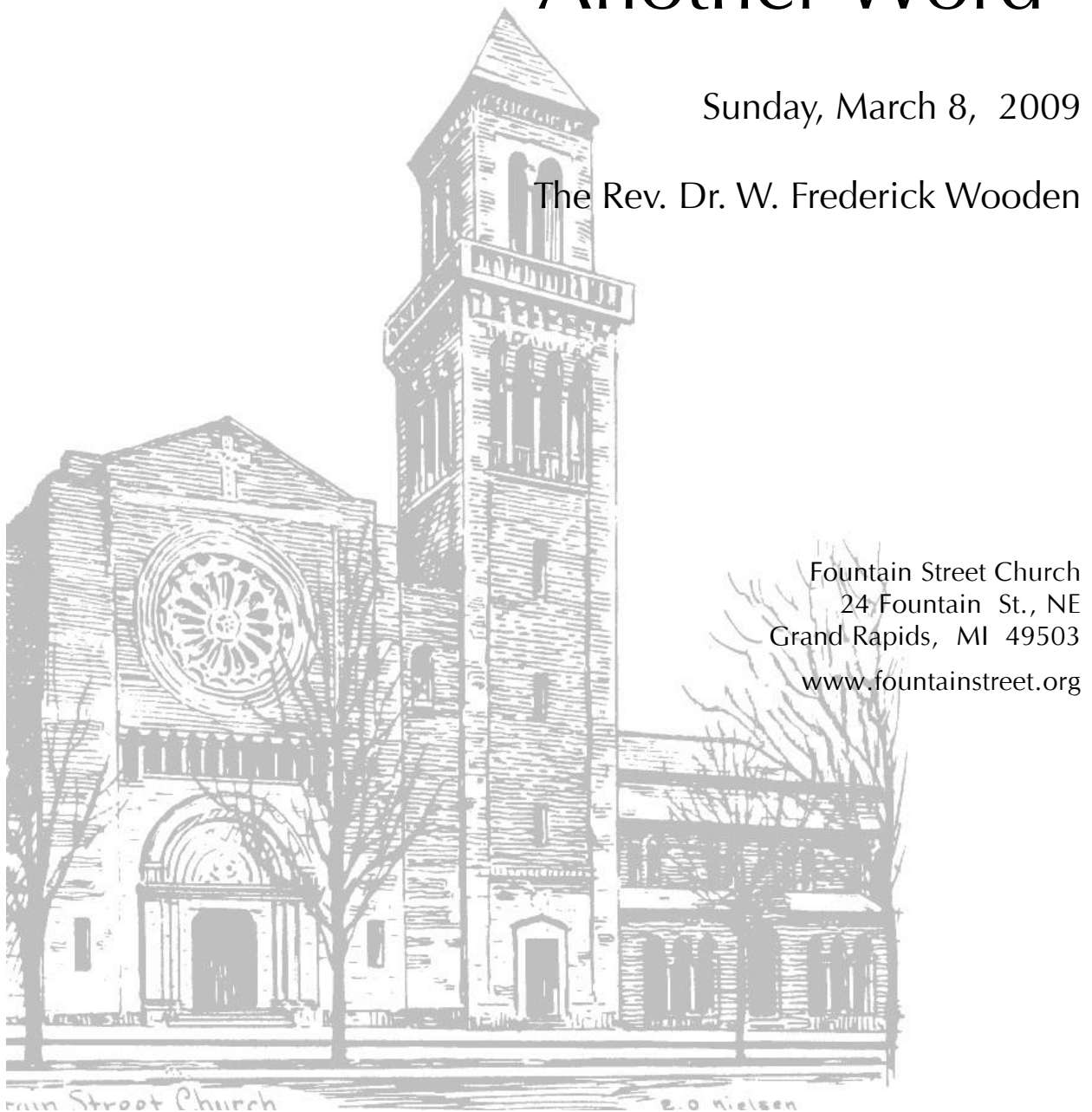


“Freedom Is Just Another Word”

Sunday, March 8, 2009

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To the reader: This sermon was only part of a service of worship with many components working together, all of which were designed to be experienced in a community context. In our "free pulpit" tradition, its concepts are intended not as truths to receive, but as spurs to your own thought and faith.

“Freedom’s Just Another Word”

READINGS

From Matthew 19

“Then someone came to him and said, ‘Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?’ And he said to him, ‘Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He said to him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus said, ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

The young man said to him, ‘I have kept all these; what do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ”

Dag Hammarskjöld -

“The price you must pay for your own liberation through another’s sacrifice is that you in turn must be willing to liberate in the same way...”

Me and Bobby McGee - by Kris Kristofferson

“Busted flat in Baton Rouge, waiting for a train
And I’s feeling nearly as faded as my jeans.
Bobby thumbed a diesel down just before it rained,
It rode us all the way to New Orleans.

I pulled my harpoon out of my dirty red bandanna,
I was playing soft while Bobby sang the blues.
Windshield wipers slapping time, I was holding Bobby’s hand in mine,
We sang every song that driver knew.

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,
Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free.
And feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues,
You know feeling good was good enough for me,
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee."

* * * * *

SERMON

What's more American than the road trip? Pioneers began it, from adventurers to refugees to fugitives, but now it is our national pilgrimage. For the last two weeks I was on the west coast. First, I attended a conference of clergy of large liberal churches. It is my annual escape from midwest winter as it is held in southern California. Even when it is only sixty degrees it is thirty degrees warmer than Michigan. And then there is the sun, the ocean, the rugged rocks, the verdant trees, the mountains that come right up to the shore. It is utterly not West Michigan. After working for a week I met up with my elder son and we drove up the coast, the Pacific Coast Highway, California Route 1, with just a car (a convertible no less) and a suitcase, a camera and little else as we snaked our way between the surf and the rocky shore from San Luis Obispo to Crescent City – about 500 miles. It was great; great to be with my son, great to be in the warmth, great to be free of winter and work and the worries of all those responsibilities.

That's why we love road trips, isn't it? We like that freedom. Cars are sold on that promise, commercials filled with cars out on open roads far from cities or suburbs. We love the idea of being footloose and free.

Liberation is our theme this month. Oppression was the theme last month, and this month it is liberation, because liberal religion understands that its core mission is liberation. That's why we start our slogan with "Free the mind." Anyone remember the girl group En Vogue? "Free the mind, the rest will follow."

Great idea, but was my trip, for all its history and symbolism, really liberating? Or was it just evasion? The song from which the title comes says to me that freedom from something is not much if that's all it is. The romance of that song or others like it such as Willie Nelson's "On The Road Again," or books like Kerouac's *On the Road*, sell us the fantasy of being completely free to do as we want, where and when and however we like. But let's face it, eventually reality kicks in – with poverty, loneliness, danger – and all the freedom in the world won't make your life worth living.

There's the conundrum. Bondage is not a life, but neither is liberty alone. Freedom is essential but insufficient. A truth that is actually very old. Passover starts a month from tomorrow. It is the original story of liberation. But liberation was only the beginning. What matters is that the children of Israel were liberated for a purpose – to serve God.

For us liberation is for the purpose as well. To be alive.

That sounds meaningless. But I believe most people are not alive. Sure, biologically they are alive. And many struggle to even to keep that – facing famine, disease, poverty. Vastly more are in bondage to hatred, fear, and ignorance as we explored last month. Or even smaller bondages perhaps, like social status or rejection, success or failure to give some examples. To be truly alive is to be awake to your whole being – mind, spirit, heart, body – and that of others as well. Very few are completely alive.

Jesus was, I think. I grew up admiring him, studying him, and believing there could be a church that sought the religion of Jesus, not about Jesus. That religion has no name, just as the first Christians did not use that name at all. They were simply people following The Way. That's what I think we are about here, or I hope so.

My story may be like yours. Some years ago I realized I was a disciple of Jesus, a follower or student, but that the path I followed was not that found in any formal Christian church. I have spent my life trying to separate the path from the path-maker, the message from the messenger, the spirit from the word. Now I want you to take the next step with me, to explore the path of liberation as it leads from bondage to aliveness.

Liberation to aliveness must be a conscious process, a path chosen, not just a flight from bondage. I believe it is a discipline that has four practices or requirements - worship, study, service and sacrifice. Just as Israel was freed from Egypt to serve God through the Torah, so we are each freed from bondages of mind and heart and soul and body so we can serve the Truth. To do that we need to find it through study, revere it in worship, live it in service, and create it through sacrifice. The first three are pretty easy to get, so I am starting with the hardest one – sacrifice.

Being the season of Lent, when people give things up as a spiritual discipline, I'll wager many of us think sacrifice is an oppression, an onerous duty imposed by religion. It is hard to see how liberating religion would involve anything like sacrifice.

But remember the song? "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose." How many times have you said "I can't do that because..." your work, your family,

your house, your bank account, your reputation would suffer? Most of the time this is a smart choice – as I should not abandon my job or my family and live a life on the road just because it feels good. But sometimes we face a choice when our principles ask us to risk or even relinquish one of those precious things. This is the challenge Jesus puts before us all, as people “rich in things but poor in soul,” as Harry Emerson Fosdick put it.

We all know what that means. What matters is not how much house, money, status or pleasure we have but how much truth, beauty, and goodness we know and revere and live. Thus the first discipline of liberal religion, the first step in spiritual liberation is sacrifice, because only when we give ourselves to the truth does the truth become important enough to know and revere and live. The altar call of liberal religion is whether you are willing to serve the truth no matter what it is and even if it costs you.

Some of you know part of what this entails. When you are a heretic you give up being normal to most people. You may lose the church of your youth or the faith of your fathers or the comforts of your heritage. You give up the advantages of being in a powerful majority for being part of a suspect minority. We all have stories of exclusion, derision and other afflictions that came from being part of a distaff religion.

But note I said ‘part.’ That sacrifice was more the cost imposed by others. I am asking you to go the second mile, to make a chosen, willing sacrifice which transforms it from oppression to the root meaning of the word, to make holy. Yes, I am introducing a heretical idea to most liberal religion – that religious freedom, like political freedom, is not free. As I quoted Goethe a few weeks ago, “they only have their freedom who win it every day anew.” Unless we give ourselves to the path of spiritual liberation, which truly does entail giving up some of our pleasure, comfort, security and status, we will lose it.

That’s because true aliveness is not something you get but something you give. This past fall I quoted Winston Churchill and now is a good time to say it again – “We make a living from what we get but we make a life from what we give.” Being alive means giving not getting. What we give, gives life. And here is where you must go the third mile, at least in spirit.

No truth really exists unless someone is willing to live for it and give for it. It’s only an idea until it takes flesh and dwells among us in a living being. Justice is only an idea until someone demands it. Beauty is meaningless unless someone makes it or sees it. Only when an idea is incarnated, yes, there’s that Christian word, does it become truth.

That's why sacrifice creates truth. When we give our lives, even portions of our life, to something larger than personal pleasure and security and even prosperity, life becomes meaningful, and we become truly alive.

And so we come to the foot of Mount Sinai, the long road from bondage to the purpose of our liberation. We are here to give our lives to the dream of true aliveness, not for ourselves alone but for everyone. Imagine a world where everyone is alive, really alive? Imagine it. Now there is a dream worth living for, worth giving your life for.