

Sermon Holy Trinity C
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Last week, at the annual Convention of the South Carolina of Women of the ELCA, I met Heather. She was a beautiful, vivacious and well-dressed woman with a bubbly personality and a confident smile. She was attending Convention on behalf of the agency Lighthouse for Life, which was there to receive a collection from WELCA groups around the synod of what are called “Freedom Bags”: backpacks filled with items like body wash and shampoo, a clean towel, and a Bible, for victims of human trafficking. Lighthouse for Life is a Midlands-area nonprofit organization which seeks to help rescue women and girls from human trafficking and support them as they transition back into independent life.

The WELCA leadership had also asked a representative Lighthouse for Life to present the Keynote Address for the Convention. When it was time, Heather took the podium. She brought one of the “Freedom Bags” up with her and began unpacking it. She pulled out all the items that had been packed into it, and expressed how absolutely valued and necessary something like this would have been for her when she herself was freed from a child prostitution ring, ten years ago.

Heather shared that she had been held captive by a succession of different abusers for 18 years. She had been entrapped when she was 14 years old by an older man who told her “he loved her,” that he would take care of her in a way that the dysfunctional family she was running away from couldn’t. As she got older, however, she was not able to see that what he was doing to her was not love, was not what being cared for looked like, because as the years went on, she was told over and over again that she could never be loved by anyone else, that she was now “damaged goods,” that she was worth nothing... ..until she began very deeply to believe it.

Which explains why even though she was living and working in plain sight in Lexington, SC, and then here in the Charleston area (when the Midlands clientele indicated that they were sick of seeing her), even though she had run-ins with law enforcement officials repeatedly over the years - why for 18 years she never sought help. She had been convinced that she wasn’t worth it. One run-in with local law enforcement actually landed her in prison on drug charges (you see, abusers use drug addiction as a way to keep the girls dependent), and while serving her short sentence, Heather was introduced - for the first time - to the Good News of Jesus.

She had not grown up in a Christian household, and had never heard the message that she was created by a Loving Father, Redeemed by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross for her sake, and called into holiness by the work of the Spirit. But during that short stay in prison, she heard that message. And even though she did not fully comprehend what that meant, and though she quickly forgot her prison confession when back on the street, a seed was planted in her. Heather wasn’t quite ready to accept the Spirit of Truth in her life yet, but something was stirred up

within her. As we hear Jesus say to believers in the Gospel of John today, “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.”

But a seed of hope was planted. So that a year later, when she was once again stopped by the police, the Holy Spirit stirred up something inside her which convinced her - despite how well she'd been coached to lie - to tell the officer everything. She knew that if she confessed it all, she would go back to prison. In fact, she was counting on it. Heather shared that she was so thoroughly powerless against her abuser, that the only way she could escape was by telling the secrets that would undoubtedly incarcerate her, but also make it so that he would have no choice but to stay far away.

Heather said that upon going to prison, the weight of all she had suffered was lifted and she knew immediately that after 18 years, she was free. In prison, she sought out Bible Study, and began to seek instruction in the Word. She sought out counseling to begin the work of unlearning the falsehoods her abusers had drilled into her head all those years, and learning instead what it means to live free as the beloved Child of God she was created to be. Now, Heather is married, working, enjoys traveling and volunteering, and has written and published a book about her life.

“We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us,” we hear in our 2nd reading from Romans today.

By hearing more from Lighthouse for Life, I learned how RARE Heather’s story is - Not because trafficking is uncommon; It’s rare because she got out alive. The Department of Justice estimates that the average age of trafficking victims in the US is between 12-14. They tend to be youth who run away from home, those who have troubled foster care relationships or adolescents dealing with homelessness. The average life expectancy of human trafficking victims is 7 years after their entrapment.

It’s rare to hear a story like Heather’s because most victims don’t live that long. She explained that escape is so difficult because victims don’t believe they are worthy of being free. They have been convinced that they are unworthy and unlovable. But SOMETHING got into Heather’s head that convinced her that she was worth saving. Through the work of the Spirit, a message of hope had managed to find its way into her heart.

Like we read in Romans today, “God’s love has been poured into your heart, through the Holy Spirit given to us.” And despite everything Heather had been told, she began to believe that her life was worth more than her abusers tried their best to convince her.

Today, on Holy Trinity Sunday, we hear in God’s Word what it means to have faith in the living, Triune God. We learn what it means to have a Father who loves us, a brother who Redeems us, and a Sanctifier who abides in us. We are reminded that we are made in the image of the threefold God of grace: we are made in and for loving relationship with God we are

made to become holy - set apart - through the gift of the Spirit we are made for mission, like the humble Servant, our Master Christ.

The Paradox of faith is that the image of GOD turns out to be the likeness of a servant. The Son of God comes, and humbles himself by taking on the form of a slave. The Paradox of discipleship is that like Christ, we become free through submission. that we put on our true identity through obedience, that his glory is only found through taking up the cross. And like Heather, who testifies that she was only able to find freedom through surrender. We become free by surrendering ourselves to our Lord and Master - by becoming as slaves to the one who is gentle and humble in heart, whose yoke is easy and burden is light.

We are justified - made worthy - by the one who took on our very sin. We are made whole by the one who was broken, for our sake. We are justified - made right - by Jesus taking on all that is wrong in the world - and defeating it through the subversive and unfettered power of love. Freedom in earthly terms may look like being untethered, remaining in control. But we find that no matter whether we are incarcerated or off the hook, whether we are at the top of the world or just struggling to get by, whether we are at the peak of health, or fighting for each breath, when we yoke ourselves to our Lord Jesus, when we bind ourselves to Christ take on the posture of servants of God, then we become truly free - free to live in the image of God we were created to be.

Today on the festival of the Holy Trinity, we celebrate that we are made in the image of loving Father, holy Comforter, and merciful Redeemer - that we are made in the image of the one who never gives up on us, who never stops calling out to us, who never stops inviting us into deeper relationship with himself. We are made worthy, despite our sin. We are loved, no matter how little we've been made to believe it. Our lives do make a difference. Faith in the one who made us, frees us, and makes us whole is effective...

A life of humble service can change a heart, Your obedience to the Master can plant the seed that saves a life. Your faith can move mountains, even if it's only one inch at a time. For Heather, someone took a chance to introduce her to a loving God, to let her know that she was lovable, in fact she was loved. And it was that tiny seed that took root, gave her the hope that things could be different, and sprouted into a living faith which now propels her to give of her time to help free others like herself.

You may not be ministering in prisons, or working at an anti-trafficking agency, but every one of you knows someone who needs to hear the good news, needs to hear that they are loved. Each and every believer is able, through the love of God, through the Grace of Christ Jesus, through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to live a life which reveals, that there is (as Paul says) a more excellent way.