



Freed to Extend Our Freedom

Christopher B. Harbin

Mark 5:21-34

We like to think of freedom during this week of July. Our fireworks displays and patriotic displays will lend credibility to the theme of a nation founded on principles of “freedom and justice for all.” We will wave our flags, enjoy our cookouts, apple pie, watch fireworks, and celebrate the blessings we have come to enjoy and associate with the birthright of every citizen of the United States of America. For many, the celebration will end on this theme. Some will look a little further and wonder about the responsibilities that come with our freedoms.

The Jews in the First Century found themselves embroiled in a national heartfelt desire for freedom from the oppression they faced at the hands of Rome. Well, some were not as concerned, like the Sadducees who benefitted from their alliance with Rome. For them, embracing the political realities brought a share of wealth, power, prestige, and a comfortable living. That was all they really cared about.

For the vast majority, however, throwing off the yoke of Roman oppression was a constant theme of life. It filtered down into the visible presence of Roman troops, especially during periods of religious festivals. It came to the fore as the people were pressed into service to carry a Roman soldier’s pack for a mile down the road. It surfaced when it came time to pay taxes that were unrelated to one’s ability to meet the demands placed upon the masses. It was visible in the circulated coinage stamped with the image of Rome’s elite and their gods.

The people yearned for freedom. The people yearned for release from oppression. They recalled the exodus from Egypt in generations past and yearned for the coming of Messiah. He was to come and throw off their yoke of oppression. He should grant them the power they saw wielded in Roman sword and spear. They wanted release. They desired change. They sought a renewal of the exodus. They yearned for freedom! As Washington led the Thirteen Colonies who struggled and gave their lives to overthrow the yoke of the British crown some 230 years ago, so the Jews expected and hoped Messiah would vindicate their cry for freedom and set them free!

Well, at least they claimed to want freedom. Some perhaps did, but in reality many just wanted power. They wanted the ability to take revenge on their oppressors. They wanted to exchange places with those in power and become the oppressors. In many ways that is what they were already doing. One could see it in the way they thought about and treated the needy all around them.

It was the attitude behind their popular theology. God would grant wealth, position, and power to the favored. Consequently, the rich and powerful seemed superior to the rest. The poor and powerless were inferior and unworthy of attention. That kind of theology was contradictory for a people oppressed by Rome, but most did not evaluate it that closely. The logic of their theology would have posited Rome as worthy of God’s favor, but they refused to see it that way. They stood firm on their position as a chosen people, but they did not accept the failure of their definitions of worthiness and responsibility.

As if that weren’t confusing enough, Jesus stepped into the picture and turned so much of their definitions and doctrines upside down. His words of freedom had nothing to do with politics. His speaking of power had nothing to do with domineering. His gospel of God’s love and acceptance had nothing to do with judging one’s merits or personal worth. To make things worse, he went on to demonstrate over and over the principles he was teaching.

Can you believe it? He just threw out the notion of deserving or earning God’s acceptance! He went so far as to ignore wholesale the laws of ritual purity that determined who was allowed into God’s

presence and participate in the temple or synagogue services. He even taught Samaritans and Gentiles, granting them access to his teaching and promising them the grace of God's acceptance! This was earth shattering.

Then in Mark 5, things start getting really messy. Jesus is on his way to restore life to the daughter of a synagogue ruler when he himself becomes ritually unclean. You see, the purity laws were designed to set worship of *YHWH* (יהוה) apart as holy and distinct from common fertility cult practices. Any contact with death, blood, disease, and bodily fluids associated with life and reproduction was to have no place in Israelite worship, lest the people fall into fertility cult idolatry. Contact with one who was ritually impure was deemed to contaminate the otherwise pure.

En route to Jairus' home, Jesus was touched by someone who was impure. Not only was the woman who touched him impure, but the crowd she had brushed against had also been contaminated. Jesus stopped the procession, asking who had touched him. We should expect him to know somehow that he had been become impure, but that is not his concern. Rather, he turns to the woman who confesses, saying, "Your faith has made you whole. Depart into peace and remain restored from your scourge."

What a strange saying! She had just done the unmentionable of secretly casting ritual impurity upon the crowd pressing around Jesus. Jesus outs her, and lets everyone know that she has contaminated them all without warning. Then he immediately overrules the entire issue of her impurity and contamination! He has not been contaminated by contact with her. Rather, he has restored her, instead! What should have had the power to defile anything pure became powerless in contact with him. Not only is Jesus free to touch and be touched by her, he is free to communicate his freedom of access to God. He would convey that freedom to others, as well.

She was afraid of how Jesus and the crowd would respond, and with due reason. She had broken the laws of ritual purity and contaminated many, making them unable to enter in either synagogue or Temple for several days. Jesus remains concerned with the protection of his freedom, however. He is interested in expanding the freedom to embrace others with grace. This freedom was not bound by legalism. Rather, it was released by the all-encompassing grace of God.

By all the norms of popular Jewish theology, this woman lived under God's condemnation. She had lost all her possessions. She had lost her health. She was unfit to participate in the religious life of Israel. Despite all this apparent evidence of God's disfavor, Jesus proclaims her faith as sufficient to break through social and religious barriers. She found audience with God and access to God's granting release, life, and new freedom.

That same declaration of freedom seems to have applied to the crowds she had contaminated. Rather than being susceptible to contamination, Jesus' gift of release and freedom extended to create new life and opportunities where no hope existed.

There is no oppression in this quality of freedom and release. Rather, there is newness of life and opportunity. There is no reversal of power structures in this freedom. It is rather power for life amid the structures in place. There is no sense of revenge in this freedom. It is rather the occasion for grace, forgiveness, and release into new opportunities of living in God's presence.

As Jesus extended his freedom to others like this woman, so we are given example in how our freedom is to be celebrated. We celebrate it by freely extending our freedom to others, that they might enjoy the same blessings we have also received. With whom will we share our freedom? If we do not offer it freely to others, do we not remain trapped in a misunderstanding of Jesus' brand of freedom? It is only when we let go that we can be truly free. Are we ready for a freedom that extends itself to others through us? Anything less can never measure up.

*_*_*