

Set Free

A Sermon for Worship on the Second Sunday of Lent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

March 12, 2017

Text: Luke 13:10-17

“Born free, as free as the wind blows, as free as the grass grows, born free to follow your heart. Live free and beauty surrounds you, the world still astounds you, each time you look at a star.” Who remembers these song lyrics? Do you remember the name of the song? (pause) Do you remember the name of the movie it was written for? (pause) Last question, do you remember who was set free in the movie? (Pause)

These lyrics are from the Academy Award winning song, *Born Free*, from the 1966 widely acclaimed and much loved movie of the same name. *Born Free* is the story of Elsa the Lioness, an orphaned lion cub raised by Joy and George Adamson after George killed the cub’s mother in self-defense. Set in Kenya, the story details how the Adamson’s raise Elsa and her two male siblings to young adulthood. At that point, the two males were sent to a zoo in Europe, but Elsa, the runt of the litter, remained behind with the Adamson’s. All went well until Elsa caused a stampede of elephants through a local village. Then they were given the ultimatum to rehabilitate Elsa into the wild or she would be shipped to a zoo. Joy did not want Elsa to go to a zoo so she undertook the rehabilitation efforts and eventually Elsa was

released into the wild at a lion preserve successfully. Joy and George then return home to England, returning a year later hoping to find Elsa to see how she was doing. They did manage to locate her and were delighted to see she had fully acclimated to the wild and was now the mother of three healthy cubs. Elsa remembered them but they did not allow themselves any physical contact with her or her cubs since they now knew that to do so would compromise their re-acclimation to the wild.

The irony of this story is that Elsa the Lioness was born free but had to be taught how to behave as a wild lion once she was set free once more. Being raised and loved by humans had in a real sense crippled her, curtailing her wild instincts and her ability to live as a lion on her own. I have no idea how to teach a lion how to be a lion and I suspect Joy Adamson didn't know much about it either. After all, it was the 1960's and the environmental movement was just beginning. Most of the knowledge of wild animals came from observing them in captive environments like zoos. Yet, somehow, some way, Joy figured out what she needed to do and she did it so that Elsa could be free.

The movie was wildly popular when it was released in 1966. It has spawned sequels of both the book and the movie, two documentaries and a television series. It played a vitally important role in the development of the concept of animal rights activism. The actress who portrayed Joy Adamson in the film,

Virginia McKenna, was profoundly changed by the experience and she and her husband became animal rights activists, creating the Born Free Foundation. This movie struck such a chord, I think, because it goes right to the heart of the connection between love and freedom. Love has to be freely given and freely received or its not love. It's something else masquerading as love, like control or dependence. Love never imposes restrictions or rules. I won't love you unless you do what I say, be who I think you should be. Love, freely given with no strings attached, transcends all circumstances, even the ones it shouldn't be able to. Like Joy doing what she had to do to release Elsa into the wild. She knew in her heart that it would be better for Elsa to die free in the wild than to spend the rest of her life in a cage. She risked Elsa's life in order to give her back the life she was born to live.

The story of Elsa and Joy gives us an interesting framework from which to ponder the story of Jesus' healing of the bent over woman which we read this morning from the Gospel of Luke. I admit I have always loved this story. Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath and provokes a confrontation with the religious authorities of the synagogue. The leader accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, one of the Commandments let's remember, by healing the woman on the Sabbath. Jesus refutes this charge using a traditional rabbinical argument technique. He reasons from the lesser situation to the greater: If it is acceptable

to “free” an ox or an ass so that it can get a drink of water on the Sabbath, which he knew was an exception to the “no work on the Sabbath” rule, then how could it not be acceptable to free a woman from her infirmity on the Sabbath. “His opponents were put to shame and the entire crowd was rejoicing” as the story ends, meaning his argument carried the day with the people, if not the synagogue leadership.

But, what else is going on here? Surely there is more to the story than just a woman healed and a leader put in his place. There is and the richness of this story and its lessons for us become visible as we consider all the different ways in which people and situations were “set free” in this story. Most obvious is the woman. We don’t know much about her, like her name or her age or anything about her life. All we know is that she was “bent over” and she had been for 18 years. The fact that the text is clear that she had had this affliction for 18 years tells us she was not born this way. Something happened to her that created her situation but we don’t know what that was. Presumably the people in her village did. The religious leaders did. But Jesus, who was just traveling through the countryside, didn’t know her story at all. He knew she was suffering. He knew she needed healing and that he could provide it, so he did. Important to note here is that she did not come to him and ask for healing. She accepted who and what she was. Jesus saw her suffering and

called out to her and she responded. She came over to him and he said simply, “woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then he laid hands on her and blessed her and, for the first time in years, she stood up straight, able to look Jesus in the eyes.

But before she could say anything to him, the religious leaders came after Jesus for breaking the Sabbath. His healing of the woman constituted “work” and work on the Sabbath was forbidden, except for certain circumstances, like watering animals and to save a life. Jesus decided that this woman was just as important as a domestic animal needing water and that she had suffered long enough. The fact that her condition had gone on for 18 years was why the leaders felt that what Jesus did was wrong. It was obviously life threatening. Therefore, they felt it did not rise to the level of being an exception. Jesus decided otherwise and he acted on that decision, a decision based on love and compassion. In that moment, Jesus freed everyone, especially the religious leaders, from the rigidity of the laws governing the Sabbath. He taught them by what he did that the people themselves matter more to God than any rules about honoring God. Jesus freed them from the notion that rules are more important than compassion.

Unfortunately, one other thing was set free in this story and it was not by Jesus. This and so many other stories in the Gospels and the Epistles portray the Jewish faith and its adherents in a

negative light. In this story, the synagogue leaders are portrayed as uncaring, small minded men who care more about strict adherence to an ancient code than another human being's suffering. In other stories, and you know them, the Jewish leaders are blamed over and over again for the persecution of Jesus and his followers, and for his death. This relentless criticism of the Jewish leaders has let loose, set free, a relentless Christian prejudice against the Jewish people as a whole that has been behind atrocities for centuries. We all know about the Holocaust of World War II but there were pogroms in Poland and Russia for years before that when Jews were rounded up and killed just for being Jews. And before that, there was the Inquisition, sanctioned by Rome, during which Jews either had to convert to Christianity or be killed in any number of gruesome ways. And before that, well, let's just say that the Jewish people have been in the crosshairs pretty much since Jesus died on the cross and that was never what Jesus wanted or intended. Jesus was a Jew himself and he only ever intended to reform Jewish practices that he felt had become too focused on the letter of the religious law at the expense of God's love. Jesus never intended to set free the horrors of anti-Semitism which are making a scary comeback across the world, even here in our country founded on religious freedom. Jesus would be horrified to think these things would be done in his name.

This brings us to the question of the ways in which Jesus always offers to set us free. Free from what becomes the question then. Free from our fears, whatever they might be. A fear of not being good enough, smart enough, attractive enough, wealthy enough, generous enough, even religious enough. Jesus is not and never has been about fear. Jesus has always been about love: Love for God and love for the other. And guess what? You can't love God the way Jesus intended and you can't love other people the way Jesus intended if you don't love yourself first. Jesus knows you are enough! You are enough just as you are, just as God created you to be. Do you fall short of what Jesus hopes you do at times? Of course! We all do. That's where forgiveness comes in. That's where grace comes in. We try to be the best person we can be knowing we will always fall short, because we are mere mortals. God knows that. God loves us anyway. IF we realize we are not perfect. IF we realize we do the wrong thing and we need to try to do better. IF we accept the healing in body and spirit that Jesus offers. IF we accept the freedom Jesus offers us. The freedom to reach beyond who and what we thought we could be, trusting that God will show us the way forward. The freedom to realize we are less than perfect and that's okay. The freedom to love and be loved, no matter how much we may feel we don't deserve it.

Set free! We have been set free! Just like the bent over woman who was set free by Jesus not because she asked to be set free but because he saw she needed to be set free. He called to her and she responded and her life changed forever! We've been set free just like the religious leaders who confronted Jesus over this and he changed forever the way they understood the Sabbath. We've been set free just like the crowd who saw the whole scene unfold right in front of them. Their lives changed forever just by being there and seeing a silly rule that said an animal was more important than a woman crippled for 18 years crumble before them.

And with this freedom Jesus has given us comes a new responsibility to respond in love as Jesus would have us do, always. When we have the opportunity to be kind, we need to take the time and make the effort to be kind. When we are confronted by anger, we are to turn the other cheek, always. When we see someone in need, we are to do what we can to respond. When we learn of anti-Semitic acts of vandalism and hatred, we are not to remain silent or still. Jesus has set us free from all that holds us back from being who God needs us to be. We are now truly free to follow our hearts into the lives God always intended us to live. The question for you now is, how has Jesus set you free and where do you go from here? Whatever your answer, we are with you on the journey. Amen.

