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BONDAGE AND FREEDOM

Luke 8: 40-56; Psalm 146

Imagine you're at a high school graduation ceremony. A young person has been chosen to give the speech on behalf of the graduates. She appropriately thanks all those teachers and mentors, parents and friends who have helped her and the other graduates make it to this point. But then she also wants to give some further encouragement to herself and her fellow graduates. She says: "My fellow graduates, even though we have received all this support and love, all this help and encouragement, at the end of the day we need to believe in ourselves. We need to believe that we can reach our dreams. We need to believe that we can be all that we want to be. There is no limit to what we can do, **if we believe in ourselves.**" It was an impressive speech, an emotional speech. People clapped and cheered. There were tears. But did we believe what she said? Did she believe what she said?

Before I try to answer the question, let me take you to another place, a lecture hall. We're listening to a group of biological researchers discussing our genetic make-up as human beings. The consensus seems to be that even though we'd like to think we are free to determine much in our lives, the truth is we are bound and limited by our genetic and chemical make-up, brain structure and a whole host of other factors that make up our DNA. In other words, even before we are born we are shaped and determined in our bodies, minds and emotions in terms of how we will cope with life as we grow, the decisions and choices we will be inclined to make, the directions in life we will pursue, even the mistakes we will make. We may want to think we're free, but we are more determined than we ever imagined.

And we know this all too well as we age, don't we? In that high-school school auditorium there may have been a number of young people. When you're young the future feels totally open, full of possibility. But there were older people there also – parents and grandparents. As we age and live our lives, as we live them within choices we have made, choices that have been made for us, circumstances and situations that have determined our life directions, our genetic makeup which predisposes us physically, mentally and emotionally... as we discover all this we realize we are not as free as we would like to think we are.

And I say all this because in our common way of thinking today as modern people, we are caught up in a contradiction. On the one hand we worship freedom. We want to be free to do what we want, when we want, to be all that we want to be and to have the resources – mental, physical and spiritual - to make our dreams a reality. On the other hand, we are being told more and more by science in particular, that we are pre-determined in more ways than we have ever

imagined, that we are a product of our genes, and even with all the exercise, diet, vitamins, medicines, therapies, organic eating, mental exercising and counselling, we can change some things, but other things, things that are vital to our well-being and quality of life, we can do little about.

And all of this becomes a source of real anxiety in us, does it not? Deep down we question ourselves. Young people may have all kinds of awesome dreams. And it's great to have dreams. But there are a lot of doubts as well. There are a lot of pressures, self-induced but also pressures placed on young people by society. To believe the future success rests on our shoulders is a great burden to bear. What will happen if and when we fail? What will happen if and when mistakes made bear consequences, consequences that will limit the choices we have left? What will happen when we make decisions to go in certain directions and then realize that other opportunities have been lost and cannot be regained? The truth is, we are more limited than we'd like to believe as human beings. But the truth is also that we have infinite potential as human beings, infinite potential even if all the cards of life are stacked against us and we are hemmed in on all sides by our genetic predisposition, the circumstances of life and the mistakes of life too. There is still infinite potential.

OK, preacher, you've made quite a claim. You've challenged us to be honest. We know freedom is a wonderful thought. But real life is a brute, and the older we get the more we feel a shrinking of possibilities for our lives. We're forced to accept life for what it is, as it is. But you are also claiming that there is infinite potential in us, even till we take our final breathe. Is this true or is this pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by?

Let us consider our gospel reading for guidance. What we will find is that Jesus contradicts both ends of our modern spectrum of opinion. We can't just do it all ourselves and to assume our childhood dreams will be our life-time reality is a recipe for defeat. On the other hand, to assume too much is determined in our future is also a recipe for defeat. What we need is to cultivate a special kind of freedom based on a special kind of wisdom, a gospel wisdom.

To discover such wisdom, let us ponder our gospel story. Jesus' time is a time before modern science and medicine. The limitations of life bump up against people all the time. But just because we live with limitations, sometimes severe limitations, does that mean we have to be stuck? Is it not true that some of the most awesome experiences and lessons in life have come to us because we have had to face unexpected, and at the time, overwhelming limitations? The infinite potential of life can only be discovered when we are faced with obstacles and challenges. Even though we're born with such potential, it's something we only discover if the right experiences are given us and we learn and grow through them.

There are two main characters in our gospel reading. First there is a father. We're told that he is a leader of a synagogue. That tells us he is not only a religious leader, but a leader of his community, a man of resources and means. But he has come face to face with his limitations in a tragic way. His precious little girl is dying and he can't do anything about it. But is this true? He comes to Jesus, publicly. And to do this involves great risk and possible humiliation. Jesus is being criticized by the religious and the well-to-do of the community. Jesus is a peasant with no formal education, critical of the established ways of doing things. To ask Jesus for help is to have to put his tail between his legs, to go against his friends. But there's his little girl. He'll do anything to help her. And this is what pushes him forward. He takes the initiative to come to Jesus, publicly. And what does Jesus ask of him? He asks for faith. "Do you believe I can help your daughter?" Healing is not some magic pill. It involves the healer and the healed. In this case, it's about a father having faith on behalf of his daughter. Even though it may seem he can do nothing for her, there is something he can do. He can have faith and follow through on his faith. But what is his faith based on?

The second person in this story is a woman, a woman who has been suffering from a constant flow of menstrual bleeding for years. In her society this is not just a medical problem that prevents her from going out and about. It's also a religious problem. For a woman to have a flow of blood is to be declared unclean. There is a ritual that has to be undergone to be clean again. Imagine if you are having a flow of blood all the time. You can never be "clean." And to touch someone unclean is to become unclean and then have to undergo a ritual of cleansing yourself. This woman would have experienced not only a debilitating medical condition, but isolation from others and the loss of human touch. But what does she do with Jesus? She has the audacity not only to touch Jesus, but to believe that a little touch may be enough to heal her. Imagine the kind of faith you have to have, faith not only that Jesus will be accepting of the touch of an unclean person, but that such a touch will heal. If Jesus is asking Jairus the synagogue leader to have faith, he has in this woman a dramatic witness of astonishing faith. If you can believe like that, things can happen in your life you'd never imagine possible.

And so it is. Jesus feels energy leave his body. He knows someone has touched him in a special way. He asks his disciples: "who touched me?" They are surprised at his question: "You are surrounded by a crowd. Any number of people may have touched you." "No," Jesus says, "This is different." And as he asks around, the woman comes forward. Jesus uses her example to say something to her on behalf of everyone: Don't think it's just me, "Daughter, **your faith** has made you well." And this is important for Jairus to hear, because upon entering his courtyard, people come rushing out of his house: "Your daughter is dead!... it's too late!" "No," Jesus says. "It's not too late. But what you need is that much more faith. Jairus, do you believe? With all

that you have been able to accomplish in your life, you have hit up against a wall. You would give up everything, your very life, to save your daughter. What I am asking you is to believe, even if it means believing the unbelievable.” The girl is restored, and her restoration is so dramatic, it’s a kind of resurrection from the dead.

Now, what does all this have to do with our modern contradiction? Is it true what our youth want to believe, that we can do and be all that we want to do and be, if we believe in ourselves? Or is it true that we are severely determined by our genes and our biological-chemical make-up, which means we can’t do everything we want to do? Well, if we take this story as our way forward, we discern a way of wisdom more true than either claims of our modern contradiction.

First, we all have limits. And if we haven’t experienced any yet, it’s only a matter of time. Death is that final limitation, but before we get to death we will face all kinds of other limitations, limitations that will show us clearly how lacking in freedom we are. Yet, the gospel tells us that we always have choices, even when all our choices seem to have come to an end. We can always believe, even if it means believing what seems impossible. There are always new things that can happen in our lives, new ways of seeing and hearing, tasting and smelling, perceiving and connecting. Life is much larger and richer than we can ever imagine or know, if we remain open, which is the posture of faith. If we trust in a presence and power greater than us to take us by the hand, no limitation in this life, not even death, has to have the last word. We are always more free than we imagine, even in the face of harsh and difficult circumstances.

At the same time, we need to learn, and we will learn whether we want to or not, that faith in ourselves alone is idolatry. It’s like faith in a drug or pill, or therapy or cause, or person. We need help and healing through any resource or person we can get it. But to put our ultimate faith in anything less than God will always lead in the end to some kind of disappointment. And if we experience disappointment, this can lead to disillusionment and cynicism. Whoever we are, as smart, beautiful and supported as we are, we will all make mistakes and we will all experience failure, frustration and limitation. That’s part of being human. Unless our faith is in some power greater than us, we can easily cave in. Learning how to trust God and follow the way Christ has called us to journey, this is what will keep giving us new wings to fly again and again when life pushes us down.

Do you have faith, faith not in yourself alone, but in yourself as God can enable and empower you to be? All things are possible, even when the ground beneath us has crumbled and we are in the grip of frustration, disappointment, shame or despair. All things are possible. But to access such possibility, we need a source of inspiration and energy well beyond us. Like Jairus

and like the woman, may we meet the God Jesus embodies deep within us, and may we find a glorious freedom to fly even when life's limits hit us hard; Amen.