

Freedom

From the series: The Human Face of God

Text: Luke 23:34

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Luke tells us that when Jesus came to the crest of Olivet and beheld the city, he wept over it. He had set his face firmly to go to Jerusalem because, once he was sure that he was claimed and called, and once he had a sense of his mission and the vision clarified, he knew that finally it would be to Jerusalem that he must go. And we find him now on the threshold of that entrance into the city where he will confront them with an alternative vision, with an alternative possibility for the structuring of the world, and as he stands there, he weeps, because, really, he knows that that vision will be rejected and he will be crucified and his concern, I think, was not in that moment that he would be crucified, but that Jerusalem would reel on its way to terrible destruction, because it was a blindness of the people, the blindness of the structures of society, structures of religion and imperial power that would eventuate in that awful decimation of the city that indeed did happen about three decades later.

Jesus wept. He came into the city as a peaceable king. Luke began the story of Jesus, the birth, with the angels' chorus, "Peace on earth, good will to those in whom God is pleased." Luke makes Jesus' entry into the city at this point the coming of the peaceable king. In Luke there is no waving of the palm branches, because the waving of the palm branches had nationalistic overtones. In Luke, there's no huge multitude; it is the disciples who praise God and hail him as Messiah. Luke throughout pictures Jesus as the one who brings peace, who pleads for a peaceable way, who stands now overlooking the city weeping, lamenting, saying, "If only you knew the things that make for peace; but, you've missed God's moment," and consequently Jesus wept for that which would transpire inevitably because he knew that the salvation of the world would come about in one way only, the way of grace, of love, of reconciliation, and he could see that that alternative possibility, call it the kingdom of God or the realm of God or the way the world would be if God were running the world - that alternative vision, he knew, would once again be rejected. And so, Jesus would be crucified. Jerusalem would be destroyed. But the tragedy was Jerusalem.

Jesus was not a tragic figure, and what I want to focus on for a few moments this morning is the magnificent freedom of Jesus. It is the freedom that is the consequence of one being so secure in the sense of one's calling, being so certain that the will of God has bound him to a certain path, that he must proceed, but he proceeds out of the inner core of his being so that the expression of his life is the expression of who he really is, and that is freedom. It is to live one's life in accord with one's deepest instincts and core values, to live one's life according to what one really believes and knows to be right by the grace of God. That is freedom. And Jesus, as he stands over Jerusalem contemplates its tragedy. He will be crucified, but he's free. He was free because he knew that what he knew was right. He was free because he knew there is salvation and wholeness in no other way than the way of reconciliation and peace. He was free because he knew that he must be about the mending of creation, about healing and transformation, and having that clear and being totally faithful to that vision, he moves now toward the city with a certain freedom. Not without struggle. And his struggle is not over yet. Nonetheless, he knows that he is acting not out of a compulsion, an external pressure; he is acting not out of fear; he is acting not out of compromise or cowardice; he is acting out of the core of his being, and that is freedom.

Jesus was able to act out and live into the reality of which he was totally convinced and that is that the world needs an alternative to the way it has conducted itself if it would ever find the *salve*, the salvation and the healing which he believed was the intention of God for the human family and, indeed, for the whole created order. And Jesus was willing to engage the structures of his day and his society in the name of the God of grace, conveying that sense of God's concern for justice with compassion, opening himself up to those who were rejected, thereby gaining the enmity of those who were the guardians of the law and the proper structuring of society. But, he was free. He dared to do it. He was bold to do it. He did it, and, of course, they killed him for it.

As we said last week, it seems as though nothing has changed. I brought this magazine, *Tikkun*, with me last week and shared a piece from Kathleen Kern who is a Christian who went to Israel to be a peacemaker between the Palestinians and the Israelis and was disillusioned with the terrible conflict and hatred, suspicion and fear that exists between those people, and the way in which the Israeli government has treated the Palestinians. I want to be very clear that I love Israel, and I respect Israel because it is out of the Jewish voice that their self-criticism arises. This is criticism within, which is rare in this world.

Tzi Marx, a young man who was here three or four years ago at one of the David Hartman Dialogues, and at that time, was connected with the Hartman Institute. He writes a piece in this issue of *Tikkun*. It's entitled "From Idealism to Idolatry." He talks about his disillusionment. He had come to Israel as a young man with all kinds of expectations about the founding of the state of Israel as a place for people to dwell in holiness, and he sees what has happened, the co-opting of the nation by power politics and the positioning of power, blind ambition and all of

that which has gone counter to that spiritual vision with which the state was founded. He says, "What happened to the religious vision in which I returned to the Holy Land which stimulates the realization of holiness as in a kingdom of priests and holy people? In which the holy ideals envisioned in the holiness code of Leviticus, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy,' culminating in the loving of one's neighbor and the stranger would be realized?" He said, "What's happened? What's happened?"

And then he recognizes that it is the religion, the national religion that permeates the mind of a young man who takes his gun and assassinates a Rabin who is the Prime Minister negotiating the peace process because perhaps in the negotiation process, a bit of the land will have to be given away. And he says, "What's going on?" The national religious structures are pushing Israel to the brink again.

I read that and I thought, Dear Tzi, it's happening all over again. You're talking about my Jesus standing on the crest of Olivet looking at the city and saying, "Oh, if only you knew the things that make for peace!" Marx says, "There have been voices; there have been pleas." But they can't stand up against the rabid passion of those reactionary voices that want to be powerful, to secure the borders, to expand the borders. The plain fact is that the force of the religious Zionism of the national religious party was too much for this "morally caring" counter movement. It always is, isn't it? It always is! The morally caring movement is always trod underfoot, isn't it? He says one of the reasons for this kind of paralysis is that it is very hard passionately to vocalize moderation. How do you get passionate about moderation? It's a problem, isn't it? Those who are good are without conviction, and those who are the worst are full of passionate intensity.

Things fall apart and the center cannot hold. Jesus standing over Olivet, Tzi Marx talking about Israel at 50 in 1998 - it is exactly the same paradigm; it is exactly the same kind of thing operative. It is the structures of society that have self-interest, the routinizing, regularizing, ordering of society, whether they be religious or political or whatever they be - structures that hedge in, control. We are told that a healthy society needs structures in order to exist, and that is true, but once the structures are in place, you move from idealism to idolatry and then blind ambition and ruthless power grabs result in situations that bring crisis and the way of peace is again shattered.

Jesus was free enough to see it and to say it. He did not simply take the party line. He did not simply submit to the established temple authority. He recognized the problem was not the occupation of imperial Rome, but he would not play the game in order to ensure that there was no disruption that might bring on Roman retaliation. Jesus said, "For God's sake, for the salvation of the world, there's no other way! Kill me if you must!"

Gandhi was gunned down because he tried to put Muslim and Hindu together in the creation of a new state. On Thursday it will be 53 years ago that they hung Dietrich Bonhoeffer because he dared, with fear and trembling, to join the

assassination attempt against Hitler because he saw the demonic rise of evil in National Democratic Socialism. He paid with his life, but he was free, he knew it was coming. Thirty years ago yesterday Martin Luther King took the bullet that he knew was coming. But, when you know something's right, when you see it, when you feel it, when it is the expression of the deepest core of your being and you say it, you stand, you do it, you act, and you die for it, you die free!

Most of us, most of the time go limping through life accommodating, cowardly, no heroism, no freedom, no joy, trying to get through, holding on sometimes with white knuckle intensity, hoping the bottom won't drop out or the roof won't cave in or they won't call us to account, or nobody will ask us the real question. No one will say, "What do you really believe?" What do you really believe would change the church? What do you really believe would save the world?

Very infrequently, very rarely a voice is raised where it will make a difference. All too rarely in this world is the truth spoken to power. And so, Jesus on the crest of Olivet weeps over the city. Tzi Marx weeps over Israel at 50. And Nelson Mandela has enough moral credibility to say to Bill Clinton, "Mr. President, president of the most powerful nation in all the world, why don't you get your act together and clean up your policy over against these little gnats around the globe? Why don't you grow up and be mature over against a Castro? Why don't you go to Kaddafi? Why don't you sit down with Hussein?"

Are they good people? No. Do they have ambition? Yes. Have they been power-hungry; have they threatened the peace of the world? Yes. But, what does it take? It takes those who are in a position of strength to go to them because they are acting out of fear, they're acting out of threat. The world is always put in danger because those who are weak are afraid and those who are strong will not bow down and be human and humane and seek reconciliation rather than points in the political polls by the bullying posture of arrogance and power. My God, is it any wonder that the world is like it is?

Two thousand years, nothing different, because we're not free. Jesus was free. Bonhoeffer was free. Gandhi was free. Martin Luther King was free. And they all got killed. If you're smart and give up your freedom, you'll die in bed. Boring. And the world will go on its way to hell.

But the thing I love about Jesus most of all and the point, I suppose, where I know I can't follow him at all is that closing scene that we read a moment ago where he says on the cross, being crucified, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That's freedom. That's freedom.

I'm not free. I have a vision, but I'm not free of those who obstruct my vision. I can't really bring myself to say, "Father, forgive them." I want to say, "God damn them." I'm not free; I'm not so sure of myself and so settled in love and grace that I can look at my enemies and say, "Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing."

I don't think that was a statement of arrogance on the part of one who felt superior over against humankind. I think that was the expression of the deepest grace and compassion of one who loved people, who understood humankind, who empathized with our human situation, who looked at us and said, "Father, forgive them. Forgive them for what they need is forgiveness and grace, because they don't understand. They don't know what they're doing. Blindly, they are driven by their passions, their blind ambition, their quest for power and glory, their lust for certainty and security, their selfish greed and constant compulsion to aggrandizement. God forgive them. God forgive them. Because they're really good people." Now, that's freedom.

Jesus wasn't play-acting. If ever I would see Jesus in all of his humanity as the full face of God, resplendent with deity, it is when he is able to manifest that kind of freedom that says to me and all of the screwed up nature of my life, "You're forgiven. I know you don't understand oftentimes what you're doing. God forgive you." That, my friends, is freedom. And I can only hope as we go through this week again, poor, compromising, unworthy servants that we are, we'll hear the word of forgiveness and just maybe now and again, here and there, take a faltering step to follow him.

Jesus is somebody. In his face, I see the face of God.