

Jesus Brings Freedom

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[0 : 00] Morning everyone who's here, morning to everyone who's joining online. It's nice to see you, it's nice to be with you, be together. My initial thoughts even before coming to the...

I'm trying to get my thumb to open this. Before even coming here when you're driving in haste and all your favorite parking spots are blocked up, nothing shows how sanctified you are or are not in those moments.

And so I had lots of opportunity to pray and bring my heart before God this morning. So always a good time. So my sermon topic is oppression, structural systemic injustice.

And no one knew when I was preparing this sermon, when I was slotted for this Sunday, that the Supreme Court would make its announcement on Friday.

And so I went back to this topic and I thought, is this the right topic? And I still think it is. I'm aware that the words oppression, systemic injustice, that sort of thing, evoke different responses from different people.

[1 : 19] If you're more... Depending on whether you're more conservative or more progressive-leaning, you may be hearing these words and bracing yourself for what you think is about to come. Is this a lecture about things that have nothing to do with the gospel?

Is this going to be a lecture about all that's wrong with current social justice issues? So... You may... If you're more conservative-leaning, you may have felt that Friday's announcement was an ending of decades of injustice.

And if you're more progressive-leaning, you may have felt like this was a rolling back to greater structural or systemic injustice. So I want to recognize that this is who we are and that all these thoughts and feelings are probably here in this room and among people who are online.

Like many people, I have found that the way these important policy and social issues are talked about to be so intensely polarized. The way of talking about these things can be so filled with anger, and not just about the issues.

And there's a legitimate anger that should be felt for issues. But it's the anger and the hate that gets directed towards people who we see as on the opposite side of our issue or the opposite side of the ballot box.

[2 : 41] And I've watched many parts of the church over the last year and a half get drawn into this really intense polarized way of talking about and approaching issues, even into these ways of hate and anger.

I've heard this said. I've even thought these things. How can a Christian think or believe, vote, or feel like that? That can't be. That's not consistent with Scripture.

That person can't really be a Christian. I've heard this. I've had these thoughts go through my head. I found that I've needed to turn off my screen and exit the online environment periodically, even for days at a time, especially before bed.

Because if I don't, my head starts to spin. I find it hard to switch my brain off and go to sleep. But I've also found myself asking the Lord, Lord, is this it?

Is this the best we can do? Is this all there is for us and for so many issues? So this sermon this morning is part of my attempt to reorient myself, to reground myself in the way I see Jesus in the Scriptures, and to do so in a way that will help me stay engaged in a more healthy way.

[3 : 57] And I hope you find this helpful, too. I hope that people here are a little surprised, maybe disappointed in all the right ways. But I hope that all of us are pushed towards a tighter connection with Jesus and pushed to prayer.

Because I think that's the right place to start. Let me start with an imaginary scene. I've actually hoped that this would... I wish this had happened in the Gospels.

I don't know. I'm pretty sure it didn't. But imagine this. This is a moment where Jesus gathers together His disciples. Picture the chosen, if that helps, right? Picture all those people. And in the chosen, the Jesus of the chosen calls His followers boys.

He says, gather around, boys. And they all gather around, and He says, I would like to introduce to you two new members of our group. And He turns and He says, first of all, I'd like to introduce to you Simon the Zealot.

Before Simon joined us, he was training with a militia group who was deeply concerned about the direction that Israel was going. He felt it was going down, and He was willing to go to any length to make Israel great again, including violently overthrowing the government, if necessary.

[5 : 07] And then He would turn to this side and say, and I'd like you to meet Matthew the tax collector. Before this, Matthew was deep in the swamp. He was collecting taxes for the occupying Romans and for the Herodian government.

And he was lining his pockets along the way. And that money that he took from all of you was being used to fund the oppression of the Romans, basically to pay for your oppressors.

And then Jesus would smile and look at everybody and maybe slap some people on the back and say, I know that you'll join me in giving them both a warm welcome. And then He'd walk away.

And there'd be this stunned silence, and the disciples are looking at each other in disbelief, like, did this just happen? Like, is He really doing this? Like, we were good. And then He brought these two people in.

And Simon and Matthew are looking at each other, and they're like, you? Like, you? And He...but there they were. Now, obviously, the scene didn't happen.

[6 : 04] Jesus went up and had a night in prayer, and He announced who His twelve were. But along the way, people were coming and going and getting to know Jesus, and He was drawing them to Himself. But these two disciples were real disciples.

They were real disciples with those exact backgrounds. And they were brought into the inner circle. And that means that they had to contend with each other. But their backgrounds are not just sort of incidental.

I mean, Simon the Zealot was called Simon the Zealot his whole life. And Matthew the tax collector was called the tax collector his whole life. Long after they had followed Jesus and the Gospels were being written, they were still being called by those names.

So those labels stuck. But their backgrounds point to some really important realities of what was going on in Jesus' life and ministry, what was going on in Israel at the time.

There was injustice. There was structural and systemic injustice. It was very real, and it was very, very difficult. Nobody could spend one day not being affected by these things, or even spend a day not even thinking about these things.

[7 : 10] It was constant. So I want to sketch a few of these. This may be familiar to some of you, so let me try and cover this quickly. So I already mentioned the Roman occupation.

So this was an unwelcome military occupation of Israel. Israel was located between Egypt and Syria. It was at the intersection of trade routes going between east and west, north and south. And it was of political and economic strategic value to Rome. So the Roman occupation was brutal and violent. Roman soldiers could come into any village and take whatever they wanted, food, animals, people, women.

They could do this, and there was no way to resist them, really, and no recourse. And they were violent. Resistance, uprisings, insurrections were all viciously suppressed.

So Jesus would have grown up walking on roads, seeing crucifixions lining the road. This was one of Rome's favorite ways to not just punish criminals, but to put people to death who were challenging their power.

[8 : 18] And why not just execute people in the quiet, you know, enclosure of a dungeon? Why do that? Well, this was about terror and trauma.

This was about making sure that everybody understood who was in charge and what would happen if you resisted their power. So another layer, Herod's government. So Herod, at the time, Herod was permitted to rule by Rome as a client king as long as he did what Rome wanted.

So he was king when Jesus was a boy, when he was born. He was the one who sent soldiers to look for Jesus to try and kill him. Well, Herod's main job was to keep things stable and keep the tax money flowing.

But sure, in Jesus' early years as a boy, Herod died. You remember that a dream came to Joseph telling him, go to Egypt because Herod's still looking for you and stay there until he's died. So Herod died when he was a boy and Herod's kingdom went to his kids. And the Gospels described them. All the Herods were brutal. They were all oppressive in their own right. One of Herod's sons, who was in charge of Judea and some of the territory, irritated Caesar Augustus. [9 : 32] And Caesar Augustus got rid of him and appointed a Roman prefect to be in charge of that territory instead. His name was Pontius Pilate. So from birth to death, Jesus was deeply touched by all those systems.

By these systems, from Herod to Pontius Pilate, these systems had a deep impact on his life. But there was another group that had an impact too, the high priest and his council.

So the Roman prefect ruled Judea, but he actually didn't govern Jerusalem. That was the high priest's job. And so his job was to keep order, mediate between the Romans and the locals, and keep things under, keep things quiet, and yes, keep the money going.

Now, the person who we read about in the Gospels was the most important, Caiaphas. He was the chief priest for the longest, and he and Pontius Pilate worked together for about 10 years.

So what does that mean? Caiaphas was really good at his job. And he and Pontius Pilate may not have liked each other, but they knew how to work together. So by the time they were hanging out and collaborating and working together in how to handle Jesus, they knew each other.

[10 : 41] They were used to handling things. Now, Caiaphas and the council controlled the temple, which is really important, made them doubly powerful. Worship was obligatory. Thousands of people came to the temple every day.

Now, you may not know this, but the original temple had a space for the priests and a space for everyone else. But when Herod built the temple or rebuilt it, he had a space for priests, a space for men, then a space for women, and a space for Gentiles.

He literally structured discriminatory status for people who were coming. He built it right into the temple. And also, there was an animal market and a currency exchange system.

If you were a pilgrim and you were coming from afar, you didn't bring an animal. You had to buy one inside. And you had to trade money. Now, here's an example. Imagine going to Dulles.

You go through security and you say, I feel like a hamburger from Five Guys. But you're told two things. One, you're not allowed to bring food and drink from the outside, so you have to buy the food that's inside. And two, I know you have money, but you have to exchange it for special airport money.

[11 : 44] And it turns out that once you exchange your money, the Five Guys burger is the equivalent of \$50. But you had no choice. Now, it's different. I would walk away and just kind of complain and go buy Tic Tacs and tell my kids to stop complaining.

Yes, there are no snacks. But if you're obliged to worship, you have to buy one of these burgers. You have to buy it and you have to be cheated in the process. So, the high priest and the council had a lot of power.

Now, with this setting, picture this. Most people in Jesus' time didn't just live in one zone or another. They moved in between them. They occupied multiple zones. So, you could have a member of the high priest council angry that he's oppressed by the Romans, angry about the violence that's happening to him and his people, and at the same time, cheerfully oversee a system that cheats pilgrims and especially the poor and never feel any tension or see the irony of it.

He could be both an oppressor and the oppressed. And so, in Jesus' time, like ours, you couldn't easily classify people. And it's true.

We all possess privilege or advantage and we all experience oppression. So, you can be white, have lots of privilege, but if you also live in a small, economically depressed town where jobs are scarce and opioids are abundant, you won't feel your privilege.

[13 : 08] You're going to feel your oppression. And you could be an executive of a large global corporation and have a lot of privilege because of the corporation you control, because of your compensation package.

But if, as that executive, you are a black female and you are followed around a store by security, you don't feel any supposed privilege. You just feel your oppression. So, people in Jesus' time, like ours, don't neatly fit into boxes.

There are no clear and obvious oppressors and no clear and obvious oppressed. So, how did Jesus respond to all this going on around him? So, we read from Isaiah 58.

We know from the Old Testament, from the writings of the prophets especially, that oppression, corruption, exploitation existed in Israel. We know how God saw it. We know how God felt about it in the writings of these prophets.

He was deeply concerned about the weak, the marginalized, the powerless, the widow, the orphan, the poor. We sometimes say the least, the last, the lost. And there are about 2,000 verses in Scripture that talk about God being a God of justice, who defends the weak and judges those who oppress.

[14:21] So, this should give us a good head start in knowing how Jesus feels about things. But, Jesus' response could be both astonishing and maddening.

It could be frustrating to everyone, both in his day and we can still find it frustrating. So, a couple things I want to point out. And I think this, and this is where, for me, I really wanted to kind of dig in as part of this grounding and reorienting.

So, Jesus and all the systemic injustice, all these structures around him. Jesus could move through all these structures and systems of injustice.

He could experience discrimination and ill treatment and never be co-opted or corrupted by it. Jesus was the Holy One, the spotless Lamb of God, the light of the world.

And whenever he came into contact with sin, disease, brokenness, and injustice, it never tainted or defiled him. It never dulled his love for others.

[15:22] And he never fell subject to those temptations. All that stuff, rather, gave way before him. And not only was he just not captured by these things, he even used systems and structures and, at times, subverted them at will.

So, one of my favorite moments when Jesus used these structures, it comes from John 7. So, it says this is the last and great day of the feast. It was the Feast of Booths. This is the time when a festival that celebrated the harvest and God's bounty and goodness.

And on the last and great day of that festival, what happened was that priests would take bowls of water and they would walk seven times around the altar and then, with great ceremonial flourish, pour the water out onto the altar.

And the crowd would yell, Hosanna. It was a way of saying, thank you, God, and we pray for your continued generosity. We recognize that life only can come from you.

And then it gets super awkward. Jesus stands up. He says to the whole crowd, if anyone thirsts, let them come to me and drink.

[16:28] As the scriptures say, whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow out of them. If you were the priest, you would have practically dropped those bowls. At this moment where you are pouring the water out and acknowledging that life and real life only comes from God, Jesus is standing up and saying, put faith in me like you put faith in God.

Because life comes from me. And he used... I'm not sure if that was me, but if it was, I'll try and not do that again. Jesus, you...

Is it my beard? It's good news because I struggled most of my life to grow a beard. So if this is happening, I'm really pleased.

Okay. I tried to bend this away. Jesus used a festival, a very public festival. A very public festival. For his own purposes. It wasn't a bad festival, but he just had a way of moving in and using things for his purposes.

[17:38] How did he subvert some of these things? I already mentioned this captive market situation where you had to come to the temple, exchange your money, and buy one of their animals for sacrifice. What did Jesus do?

He literally flipped the table. I have seen no end of flip the table memes in the last 18 to 24 months, but he did that. He disrupted this system that was cheating people and disadvantaging the poor.

Now, it probably lasted for as long as a week while he was in the temple every day preaching, but after he died, I bet everybody set everything back up again and kept on going. But he did it.

And in both these instances, him shouting during the water festival moment and flipping the tables, it didn't go down well with anybody who was in charge of the temple. Now, part of why Jesus could move through structures and systems as he did, use them and subvert them, is because of who he centered.

So this idea of centering is everywhere in discussions about social justice, and there's a lot of important, there's a lot to be learned from this.

[18 : 47] There's a lot of validity to this. And so I asked myself, who did Jesus center? I will admit before coming into working on the sermon, I probably would have answered the question that he centered the poor or the marginalized because of what I see in the Old Testament.

When I looked closer at it, I realized that Jesus centered his heavenly father. Not quite what I expected. In John 5, Jesus said, I only do and say what I see my father doing and saying. In John 8, he said, He always does what is pleasing to his father. He repeatedly said he was sent from the father, does the father's will, and seeks to glorify his father. Jesus relentlessly centered his father by choosing to empty himself and become a servant who loved and obeyed his father without exception.

Jesus dropped his agenda and said he will only have his father's agenda. That's centering his father. What his father cared about and was doing, Jesus cared about and did.

What his father had to say, Jesus was saying. But when it came to his followers, Jesus asked them to center himself. It's pretty audacious. Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, the life, the resurrection life, the light of the world.

[20 : 08] Every time Jesus said to somebody, come follow me. Can you imagine somebody coming up to you and saying, come follow me? He'd be like, and you are because you are so, why should I follow you?

He said, come follow me. Every time Jesus told people, believe in me and put trust in me because you will have eternal life. High stakes centering of himself.

But Jesus asked people to center himself as he centered his father. There's always an other centeredness. And that's important. And there were a number of effects of Jesus centering his father.

Jesus centering his father meant that primarily he was a worshiper. He was intimate with his father. He could say, the father is in me and I am in the father and we are one.

He could say, if you see the father, if you see me, you see my father. And out of that centering of his father flowed all his love, all his ministry to heal, forgive, restore, cast out demons, raise the dead, and even flip tables.

[21 : 16] Jesus centering his father meant he was completely open to his father's love and power and life. And no darkness could dwell in him. And the effect it had on him was that it meant that he was meek and lowly.

He invited people to come find rest in him. It meant that he would, and the expression was, he would not break a bruised reed, which means he was gentle. He was gentle with the wounded. It meant that Jesus was safe.

He could carry his identities as a Jewish man around a Samaritan woman with all the bad history that that involved. And she would find it life-giving and not oppressive.

Jesus' expectation of us was that as he centered his father, that we center him, being one with Christ, living in him and him living in us, that we too would be primarily worshipers, open to the love and life and power that comes through Christ.

And that out of us then would flow that same love towards others, that same ministry of healing and deliverance, plus food for the hungry, relief for the poor, and advocacy on behalf of the oppressed.

[22 : 26] Part of how Jesus confronted structural injustices was also to confront our hearts, to see us transformed by radically centering himself so that in turn, out of the overflow, the world would be changed around us.

But there was one other way that Jesus also responded to structural injustice. It was very inspiring during his lifetime, but in his death it was confusing and deeply counterintuitive. So during his life and death, Jesus handled power.

That very thing that's misused by people who oppress, the very thing that gets embedded in structures that are unjust and oppressive, but he used power in ways that were consistent with his father, whom he centered.

So lots of people comment, Jesus didn't have formal power, and that's true. He didn't come from a prominent or well-connected family, he didn't have degrees, he didn't hold a position of influence or power, he didn't have a lot of money.

But in some ways that misses the point. There are lots of other people in the scriptures who do have those things. It's actually about how you handle the power in those things. Jesus had tremendous power, the power of the Spirit, which I love to talk about.

[23 : 40] The nature of this power was not that of the world. This power subverted the demonic in sickness and death. It set people free. But Jesus also had something else, he had love.

I remember thinking, can I say the power of love? And I just felt this wave of cheese come over me, because I thought, like, even my mobile banking app will say something like, it's the power of love. And I'm like, it's, like... Like... That's not what my bank statement says. But anyway, the power of love. So it's become a little bit empty.

But love actually is powerful. Love sees and affirms your identity and washes out the wounds of shame. Love forgives and extends grace when you least deserve it and makes redemption possible.

Love protects the hurting and the powerless. It houses the homeless, works for healthcare and quality education, and it gives food in times of famine. But to take it one step further, Jesus had sacrificial love, the kind that washes the feets of enemies so that the cycles of violence can be broken and enemies transformed.

[24 : 50] It's the kind of sacrificial love that dies for other people's wrongs and even to handle their oppressions. This kind of love is called cruciform. It's in the shape of a cross.

This was deeply perplexing and counterintuitive. Most people during his lifetime expected Jesus to be a military Messiah. His followers hoped that he would overthrow Rome and usher in the next kingdom for Israel.

And to be honest, his detractors were feared that this is what he was up to anyway. But I'm going to read you a quote. This is a quote from Diane Langberg. It's from her book, *Power, Redeeming Power, Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church*.

I highly recommend it. Here's her quote. The Lord we follow, God incarnate, had to navigate secular and religious cultures of his day when he came to earth as a human person.

He was so despised that both the Roman Empire and the Jewish nation, who hated each other vehemently, joined forces colluding to kill him because he would not bow to their rule.

[25 : 57] Miroslav Volf has said, the single most significant factor in determining whether a religion will be implicated in violence is its identification with a political project and its entanglement with those trying to realize and protect that project.

The temple leadership did exactly that with the Roman Empire. Thank you. I'll try and open this again. Jesus' life lived a life centered on his father, living out the power of love and the Holy Spirit, serving others, healing, giving them life.

He used and subverted structures and institutions according to his father's will while never being captured or conformed to them. And that was so threatening to those structures and systems and the people who benefited from those structures and systems that they joined forces to kill him. But somehow, somehow, in the genius of God, this was the undoing of those unjust structures and systems. And somehow, it was the undoing of that oppression.

So what does that mean for us? Paul picks all this up and carries out in his writings what it means for us. He seemed clear that those of us who said yes to Jesus' call to follow him were not only different, but were to live differently.

[27 : 19] He seemed to think we were bonded together in a shared baptismal identity of being in Christ, an identity that was to run deeper than all other identities and loyalties, not to get rid of them, but so that we could hold those things in love in ways that don't oppress others.

Paul seemed clear that we were to live like a new community of people in whom the resurrected Jesus dwells by his spirit, a new community that loved and served even its enemies, or at least people who are different from them.

This new community would embody the way of Jesus in the world in relation to these structures and systems, in relation to oppression and injustice, to do what Jesus did and is continuing to do and wants to do by his spirit through us, to make all things new.

And I think when Jesus introduced Simon the zealot and Matthew the tax collector, this is what he had in mind. When Simon and Matthew centered Jesus in their lives, they then had to, they were forced into a relationship with each other and had to reckon with each other and their backgrounds and pasts.

They were required to learn to love each other, even to the point of laying down their lives for each other. And they were committed to seeing God transform the other one from the inside out and then see that what God has done inside of the other spill out into the world around them to change them. [28 : 47] So when I think about this, when I think of Jesus and how he was in the world in these structures and systems, when I see his expectations on us, I start to wonder what would happen if we started really leaning into this?

What would happen if we started leaning into this space and started asking the Lord, asking for his spirit, for fresh insight, fresh revelation on how to come together on the basis of this way of Jesus, this way of centering him and having an identity in him and finding fresh paths forward through this polarity and through the anger and through all that, all that ways that these things are talked about. I start to wonder if there's space for redemptive solutions. Let me close in prayer. Lord Jesus, Lord, I think my confession is that when I see all the things that are, all the issues, important issues, Lord, when I see all the issues out there that are affecting the lives of my family and my friends, coworkers, people I go to church with, people who not just hold different views but occupy different places in these issues.

Lord, some of it feels, not the issues, Lord, but how to really get into it in a way that honors you, that follows you into redemption. It feels a little bit above my pay grade.

I don't feel smart enough to know how to navigate that. So my prayer, Lord, is that you help us by your spirit find each other in love, find ways of maintaining the bond of love, the connection of the spirit with people who are different from us and that you would move us to pray and receive from you the kind of fresh approach that will open up space for you to make all things new in the midst of a lot of pain and a lot of hurt.

[30 : 50] I thank you, Lord. Amen.