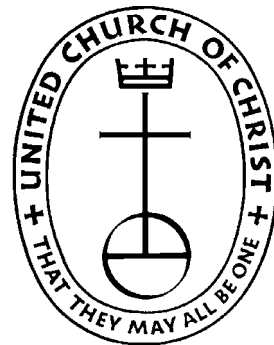


Amazing Grace and Moral Outrage

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
February 21, 2010



This sermon discusses the opposition to slavery in Judaism, in Jesus' ministry, and in the history of Congregationalism. Today more people are enslaved than ever before. The message of freedom offers comfort to each of us, but we also are challenged to make sure everyone in God's world is also free.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
Passionately Committed to Social Justice*
241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
February 21, 2010 (#1393)
Reading: Isaiah 58:6-9a; Luke 4:16-19

First Congregational Church
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Amazing Grace and Moral Outrage

In this sermon, I am going to move from place to place, from time period to time period, starting in Egypt around 3,500 years ago. The Egyptian enslavement of the Hebrew people and their redemption from that bondage is a pivotal story in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Hebrew people at that time were migrant workers enslaved by cruel taskmasters. The Exodus is about slavery and freedom.

Now we move to ancient Judah around 1,000 years later – after the exile, another enslavement in which the Babylonians kept the Hebrews in bondage. A writer we call Third Isaiah challenged those liberated from that bondage to look at the practice of fasting in a new way, saying these were God’s words for the people:

Fasting like yours today will never make your voice heard on high! Is that the sort of fast that pleases me – a day when people humiliate themselves, hanging their heads like a reed, lying down on sackcloth and ashes?

On the contrary, this is the sort of fast that pleases me. Remove the chains of injustice! Undo the ropes of the yoke! Let those who are oppressed go free and break every yoke you encounter!

The fast that pleases God is one that removes the chains that bind people; it sets people free.

We jump again – to a synagogue in Galilee amidst the Roman Empire. Luke said Jesus initiated his Jewish reform movement in Nazareth by reading these words from Third Isaiah:

The spirit of our God is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.

So Jesus’ calling was to proclaim release to those held captive and to set at liberty those who were oppressed.

Freedom is at the core of the biblical narratives.

We have jumped from Egypt to Judah to Nazareth – from long before the com-

mon era to the beginning of that era. Now we move again – to 18th century London where John Newton served as captain of a slave ship, buying slaves in West Africa, selling them in England. On one voyage, after surviving a terrible storm at sea, Newton had an evangelical conversion experience. He began to faithfully read the Bible and he avoided profanity, gambling and drinking. But he kept transporting slaves. His new faith didn't affect the horrible way he made his living.

When he left the slave trade, Newton became an evangelical lay minister and in 1764 was ordained an Anglican priest. He remained silent about slavery for twenty-four more years, until 1788 when he published a forceful pamphlet in which he described the inhuman conditions of the slave ships and in which he apologized for “a confession which comes too late. It will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.”

Newton joined English abolitionist William Wilberforce in leading the campaign to abolish the slave trade, and he lived long enough to see slave trading outlawed in Great Britain in 1807. Less than 30 years later, the British Parliament freed all slaves held captive in the British Empire.

John Newton was clearly tormented by memories of what he had done to other human beings. But alongside that torment, his faith focused on God's amazing love and willingness to forgive. We see that in the hymn he wrote, *Amazing Grace*.

Knowing Newton's story, listen to that hymn's first verse: *Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*”

In the 1960s, people often replaced the word “wretch” with “soul” – amazing grace that saved a “soul” like me. But we must remember the context in which that hymn was written. Newton had done some incredibly wretched things and had been blind to the pain he was inflicting on other children of God. For years, he was haunted by the ghosts of nearly 2,000 slaves. But his faith declared that God's grace even encircled a penitent slave trader.

A powerful hymn – again slavery and freedom.

Now, still in the 18th century, we journey again – to the New World. The slave trade was an important part of the economy of the Americas. By the middle of the 19th century, there were four million slaves in the United States.

This church's roots are in American congregationalism, which began and thrived in New England. That region's commerce and agriculture weren't suited to slave labor.

But the slave trade itself was there! Ships sailed from the docks of New England loaded with rum which was traded for slaves in Africa. The slaves were then taken to the Caribbean and sold for money and molasses. The money returned to New England merchants and the molasses was used to make more rum so the triangular trade could begin again.

But by the end of the 17th century, some of our forebears became uncomfortable with this trade. In 1700, before John Newton was even born, Samuel Sewell, a prominent Congregationalist, wrote the first anti-slavery treatise in the American colonies.

In 1839, a Portuguese ship, the *Amistad*, transported 53 captured African slaves to Cuba. As they were being transported to their new owners on the other side of the island, the Mendians mutinied and gained control of the ship. Trying to head back to Africa, they ended up off the shore of New Haven, Connecticut.

It took two years of legal proceedings to decide their fate. During that time, while they were locked in a New Haven jail, Congregational church members fed, clothed and took care of them. When their case went to the US Supreme Court, former President John Quincy Adams, an active Congregationalist, defended them and prevailed. The court set them free.

In 1832, Congregational ministers Lyman Beecher and Leonard Bacon founded the American Anti-Slavery Society. Bacon's book on abolition stirred deep feelings in Abraham Lincoln about the inequalities of human bondage.

In 1846, several Congregationalists organized another abolition society, the ecumenical American Missionary Association.

As the struggle over slavery intensified prior to the Civil War, Lyman Beecher's son, Henry Ward Beecher, pastor of Plymouth Congregational Church in New York, became the nation's most prominent abolitionist. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, wrote a story, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that helped awaken the nation to the evils of slavery.

Many Congregational churches and many members' homes – including Rev. George Hathaway's parsonage in Skowhegan, Maine – were part of an underground railway protecting runaway slaves. Rev. Hathaway was a strong advocate of women's rights and an ardent abolitionist. His five daughters often awoke to find frightened slaves hidden in their home – the slaves would arrive in the dark hours of early morning and leave again after the sun set.

In 1862, just as the American Civil War began, Margaret, the second oldest of Rev. Hathaway's daughters, came west to marry Jotham Bixby, who had grown up in

the house next to the Hathaway's parsonage. She had to brave two prolonged sea voyages and trek across the pre-canal Isthmus of Panama. She and Jotham would eventually move to Rancho Cerritos, out of which Long Beach would emerge.

Margaret Hathaway Bixby wanted a Congregational church here, a church like her father's, so in 1888, she helped organize and start this congregation. Her father had retired and moved to California where he lived with Jotham and Margaret. Margaret hung a portrait of Abraham Lincoln in his room. Rev. Hathaway preached the first sermon after this congregation was formed.

So the issues of slavery, freedom and faith were all bound together in the formation of this congregation.

But that was 122 years ago. Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1833, and abolished here by the 13th Amendment in 1865. So why talk about it today?

Well sadly, slavery still exists. There are at least 27 million slaves in our world today – girls and boys, men and women of all ages who are forced to toil in the rug loom sheds of Nepal, to sell their bodies in the brothels of Rome and massage parlors of San Francisco, who break rocks in the quarries of Pakistan and who fight wars as child soldiers on the continent of Africa.

There are more slaves in bondage today than at any other time in human history. Human trafficking is the second-largest and fastest-growing criminal industry in the world.

Most slaves today suffer in debt bondage, where poverty forces families to sell their children's labor as collateral for loans. Thus the world's poorest countries, like Mauritania and Cameroon, have the highest levels of slavery.

Modern slaves are often migrant workers whose wages are retained by their employers for supposed debts accrued for food, transportation and housing.

Many modern slaves are sex slaves, forced into prostitution to pay off debts. Over two million children, some as young as six years old, are exploited in the worldwide child sex trade. It is thought that a quarter of child sex tourists who abuse those children are Americans.

There are more than 50,000 slaves in the United States today. Approximately 17,000 people are trafficked and forced into slavery each year in our nation. About half of those slaves work in prostitution, about a third in domestic service, and the rest in agriculture, sweatshops and restaurants.

David Batstone, Paul Boyd-Batstone's cousin, is one of the American religious leaders most active in opposing slavery today. He wrote, "Go behind the façade in any major town or city in the world today and you are likely to find a thriving commerce in human beings. You may even find slavery in your own backyard."

David Batstone did in fact discover slavery near to him. He and his wife often dined at an Indian restaurant near their home in the San Francisco Bay area. Then came the news. A young woman from India came home to her apartment to find her two roommates passed out from carbon monoxide from a blocked heating vent. She called their landlord, who owned that Indian restaurant where the two unconscious women worked. He arrived immediately with other men. He wouldn't take the girls to the hospital. They were rolled up in a rug, thrown into a van and then the roommate was forced into the van as well. Someone driving by called the police but nevertheless one of the girls died.

The restaurant owner had used fake visas and false identities to traffic hundreds of adults and children into the US from India. He forced them to work long hours at his various business enterprises for minimal wages that they had to return to him as rent for one of his apartments.

A few years ago in El Monte here in southern California, a slave sweatshop was discovered. Dozens of undocumented Thai immigrants were locked up and guarded by night and forced to sew garments by day. All their wages were withheld until they had worked off debts for their transportation. The wages were applied to those debts at the rate of \$1.60 per hour.

In San Diego County, fifteen-year-old Reina was slipped across the Mexican border and forced to join other teenagers in serving as prostitutes for farm workers out in the fields.

When she was Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice said, "Defeating human trafficking is a great moral calling of our time." She's right. Christians should find it a moral outrage that slavery still exists and a moral calling to work for its abolition. President Bush, addressing the United Nations in 2003, said, "The trade in human beings for any purpose must not be allowed to thrive in our time." And just last month, President Obama said, "We acknowledge that forms of slavery still exist in the modern era, and we recommit ourselves to stopping the human traffickers who ply this horrific trade. We must join together as a nation and global community to provide a safe haven by protecting victims and prosecuting traffickers."

Slavery, freedom and faith.

There are many ways each of us can help abolish slavery. The insert in your bulletin lists two websites – that’s a good place to start. The “Not For Sale Campaign” has designated today as a Freedom Sunday in which this issue will be raised in Christian pulpits. Sadly, in very few pulpits: 31 in the entire state of California; 11 in Southern California, mostly evangelical churches. I don’t understand why, but liberal Christians don’t have much interest in abolishing modern slavery.

Let me end with some words from Rabbi David Stern. He said, “We Jews are bearers of a proud legacy of protest. We belong to a people whose identity was fired and formed in the passage from Pharaoh’s oppression to God’s freedom. The One who overthrew the Pharaoh of heartless power is the One who wants us to be partners rather than subjects. The One who says to us, ‘Here is your freedom, and here is your truth – to be free means to be responsible. Here is your world with all its need. Here is your community, with its poor and hungry and ill. Here is your family with all its blotches and blemishes. You are incomplete human beings and I give you an incomplete world. You will call the process of making it whole, *tikkun olam*, striving for healing and repair, redeeming sparks of holiness wherever they hide. The task of *Tikkun* means that your world comes not tied up neatly in a bow, but with a big label on it containing the two words that every Jewish parent dreads most the night before Chanukah [and he could have added every Christian parent dreads most the night before Christmas] – the two words: Assembly Required.’

“Assembly required to assert the dignity of those whom society vilifies. Assembly required to provide opportunity for people to lift themselves beyond their own circumstances, and for people to share their good circumstances with others.

“Assembly required in our homes and our lives – where surprising slaveries cry out for redemption. Because in homes where one spouse renders another without power or dignity, there is slavery. When we find ourselves addicted to behaviors that diminish the spark of God in ourselves or in others, there is slavery. When we treat other human beings as mere instruments on our own paths to success or gratification, there is slavery.”

The rabbi went on: “Our sages taught us that the worst part of bondage in Egypt was that we became so inured to it we stopped hoping for something better. We, like our ancestors, sometimes don’t recognize the shackles any more, cloaked as they are in the trappings of status, busyness and achievement.

“Assembly required: that is the task on the path from slavery to redemption. It is a path that runs through the messiness of the world and not around it. A path we follow with grand dreams but necessarily small and imperfect steps.

Rabbi Stern is right – we must begin, with small, imperfect steps. We must learn more about slavery in our time and in our world. We must link up with other people of faith who want to do something to eliminate that slavery.

Our Christian faith always seems to link comfort and challenge. A lot of folks just want the comfort, but the comfort is always coupled with challenge. John Newton felt the comfort of God’s forgiveness, of God’s amazing grace, but he felt the challenge of ending the slave trade of which he had been a part. The message of freedom offers comfort to each of us – we are free to be the people we feel called to be, we are not manipulated as puppets on a string either by God or by fate – we are free. But we also are challenged to make sure everyone in God’s world is also free.

Listen again to those words with which Jesus began his ministry: *The spirit of our God is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed.*