

2021 07-04 WORSHIP SERVICE

Welcome – Pastor Lois

Good morning! Welcome to all – here, in-person and those on zoom. Hope everyone who wanted to has had a chance to enjoy some goodies this morning. It worked so well to have Tim Schrag here last year for the 4th of July that we thought we'd do a reprise! A warm welcome to him and Jeff Koller.

What items do you have to share with one another this morning?

- Take note of the Senior Fellowship picking up again – not this coming Friday, but the next week, July 16 at 10:00 a.m. This is for seniors, or anyone who would like to come! We'll have coffee and visit – catch up with one another after many months of not having this time. Programs will begin NEXT month, in August.
- Other?

Jeff – please come and share with us about MDS.

I invite you to stand now and join in the Call to Worship...

Morning Prayer –

Creator God, we give you thanks for your magnificent creation. Give us wisdom as we try to tend and steward it well.

We give you thanks for our loved ones – children, parents, family and friends. We pray particularly for Steve and LaNae this morning as well as for Steve's brother and sister as they remember and celebrate their mother, Donna. Give them comfort in their memories and peace in their faith. We pray for others who are grieving – whatever the losses may be, we pray for your Spirit to be present and give what's needed.

We give you thanks for our youth – those who are going to Rocky Mt. Camp a week from today, bless them and the adults going with them. Give them safe travels and help them to grow in their faith and in your joy. We thank you for our college age youth. Give them wisdom and clear direction as they study and work and consider direction and how to use their gifts in this world. We thank you for our Middle School youth and the younger children. Bless each of them and all of us as we begin again with Christian Education classes. Give us open and thinking minds that can wrestle with questions and be stretched and expanded to be filled with gratitude and surprised by the presence of your Spirit.

We give you thanks for organizations of people that work together for good. Thank you for the MCC and the work they do around the world. Thank you for the amazing efforts that were put forth to make the sale happen this weekend, for the resources that were spent and those that were given on behalf of the work of MCC. We thank you for MDS and the important work they do here, in our region and around the country. We thank you for opportunities that are created for discernment and direction as people of faith seek to follow Jesus' call. We're

especially grateful for Tim and Jeff, for the work they do and the messages they're bringing us this morning.

We give you thanks for this nation and the nations of the world. As independence day is celebrated, help us to remember that we are yours, members of your body and dependent on you. We are grateful for laws and governments that keep us safe and maintain order; and we also remember that you, God, are our ultimate security and it is in you that we find our peace.

Be with us now as we continue to worship you together. Bless this service and may we take strength from it. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Benediction –

Go now with the faithfulness and fortitude of Ruth, the compassion and steadfastness of Naomi. Go with the love of God as your guide. Amen.

This morning I'm wish to share with you from three stories. The book of Ruth. The story from the 19 century of Frederick Douglass. And the third...not yet completed....each of our stories. I humbly pray that they will connect in such a way that God's word for us may be heard.

Prayer

Story #1 we just heard. The story of Ruth. One of my favorites books of the Bible, and the author wastes no time to set the stage with tension. As follows. Naomi and her husband move from Judah to Moab. They have two sons. The sons marry women from Moab. How nice.

But by verse 5 of chapter 1 the 'one big happy family' falls apart. Naomi's husband dies. Then her two sons die. Empty handed and bitter, Naomi decides to head home for Judah. That the tension, the uncertainty. Will Naomi's Moabite daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth go with her to Judah? Or will they stay home and look for another husband?

Staying home seems the most practical and common sense choice. Leaving home to spend the rest of your life with your impoverished mother in law in a foreign country?

The story unfolds. The daughter's in law, Orpah and Ruth announce they are staying with Naomi. How nice. ⁷ ***With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.***

They are all three together at the start of the road back to Judah.

But Naomi objects and injects common sense. ⁸ *Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."*

Reasonable advice. So which will it be?

Orpah and Ruth ratchet it up, with emotion and statements of commitment. Verse 9: *Naomi kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."*

A lot of love there. Strong loyalty.

However again Naomi insists on practicality: But **Naomi said....**, *“Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? And explain how they have no future with her.*

It is a pivot point for Orpah. ¹⁴ *At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law **goodbye.***

In the real world you have to be practical. True back then, true today. Some things never change.

But. **But...** *Ruth clung to her.* ¹⁵ *“Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.”*

¹⁶ *But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.* ¹⁷ *Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”*

Unreasonable loyalty. Impractical love such that self-interest is set aside.

Were this a SS class, we’d stop now for me to ask, what come to your minds as you hear this story? What would you do, and why?

We’ll come back to Ruth, but first the second story of Frederick Douglass.

He was a famous 19th century slave who escaped and became a voice for abolition and various freedom causes. This particular story was written by Heather Cox Richardson, a history professor at Boston College. I get her blog feed every morning, this was in my inbox on May 23. Since it’s a little hard to follow what someone else is reading, I’ll put it up on the screen so you can follow along.

Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1838. In his twenty years of life, he had had a series of masters, some kind, some harsh, and one who almost killed him. But by 1838, he was a skilled worker in the local shipyards, earning good money for his master and enjoying a measure of freedom,

as well as protection. He had good friends in the area and had fallen in love with the woman who would become his wife.

It was enslavement, but within that existence, it was a pretty good position. His peers in the cotton fields of the Deep South were beaten like animals, their deaths by violence unremarkable. Douglass himself had come close to being "sold down the river"....and he knew that being forced to labor on a plantation in the Deep South would kill him.

His relatively safe position would have been enough for a lot of people. They would have thanked God for their blessings and stayed put. In 1838, Frederick Douglass was no different than they were: an unknown slave, hoping to get through each day. Like them, he might have accepted his conditions and disappeared into the past, leaving the status quo unchanged.

But he refused.

His scheme for escaping to freedom was ridiculously easy. In the days of slavery, free black sailors carried documents with them to prove to southern authorities that they were free, so they could move from northern and foreign ports to southern ports without being detained. These were the days before photos, so officials described the man listed on the free papers as they saw him: his color, distinguishing marks, scars. Douglass worked in shipyards, and had met a sailor whose free papers might cover Douglass... if the white official who looked at them didn't look too closely. Risking his own freedom, that sailor lent Douglass his papers.

To escape from slavery, all Douglass had to do was board a train. That's it: he just had to step on a train. If he were lucky, and the railroad conductor didn't catch him, and no one recognized him and called him out, he could be free. But if he were caught, he would be sold down the river, almost certainly to his death.

To me [Heather Cox Richardson], Douglass's decision to step aboard that train is everything. How many of us would have taken that risk, especially knowing that even in the best case, success would mean trying to build a new life, far away from

everyone we had ever known? Douglass's step was such a little one, such an easy one... except that it meant the difference between life and death, the difference between a forgotten, enslaved shipyard worker and the great Frederick Douglass, who went on to become a powerful voice for American liberty.

Tomorrow, my students will graduate, and every year, students ask me if I have any advice for them as they leave college or university, advice I wish I had had at their age. The answer is yes, after all these years of living and of studying history, I have one piece of advice:

*When the day comes that you have to choose between what is just good enough and what is right... **find the courage to step on the train.***

It happens that just weeks earlier I had preached on the book of Ruth, and when I read this story a major light bulb went off. That last line, for me, connected to Ruth.

Ruth stepped on the train. She could have stayed put. Her life could have been just OK. If she'd acted in reasonable self-interest, we'd never have heard of her and she would have faded into history. But she chose to do what what was right. She prioritized her bond of love and loyalty to Naomi, and she found the courage to step on the train....to walk...step by step...with Naomi....to Judah.

She could have stayed home and lived with good enough.

Why the NT reading and sermon title? Her courage had consequences far beyond her lifetimes. For the sake of time, the NT reading ended with David but it goes forward as the genealogy of Jesus. Whether we label it courage, or commitment, or loyalty, Ruth's mattered. When that inconsequential nobody stepped on that train...whither thou goest, I will go...little did she know that this is the stuff which makes up the cloud of witnesses. The 'train of salvation'.

The two stories aren't the same, but they have the same echoes. Stay with me a bit with Frederick Douglass. What jarred me the more I thought of it was that he could have lived out his life in the land of good enough. He was one of the lucky ones, a slave for whom circumstance meant an OK existence. When he literally stood on the train platform, when he stood at the crossroad of

choice...freedom was the risky, dangerous, unknown option. That could have caused him to draw back.

Fear can enslave us in a way as powerful as chains.

That was Ruth's choice. Leaving home to be an immigrant with a powerless mother-in-law. Surely there was fear and anxiety in that. Just staying home had to be so seductive. Safety. Security. Familiarity. But she chose a future with Naomi simply and profoundly because it was the right thing to do. *May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me."*

There a sort of famous song, Dare to be a Daniel. Maybe instead, dare to be a Ruth. And then I came to this strange thought. What if the kingdom of God is made up of a bunch of nobodies from nowhere....like Moundridge, or Goessel, or Elyria...having the courage to do the right thing.

Which then brings us to today, and to our stories. That's the third piece. What's today? July 4. Freedom Day. Except that I wonder.

No we aren't slaves, but are we actually free?. Fear is a powerful prison. Familiar ruts can be just as powerful in guiding, and restricting our lives as chains and prison cells. Staying inside our 'comfort zones' can limit us just like prison walls.

There's safety and security....we think....in the familiar. The routine. The predictable. Even if it is just good enough. Even if one has to be practical and stay home and let Naomi go down the road by herself.

Except that we always need to be sure that our narratives, our stories, are told with our language of our faith. When we believers talk about the celebrate freedom, it's not about a government. What's our faith language? It's freedom in Christ. Freedom from the invisible subtle bonds of the world that seek to shape us.

Get step the train...let's play with that language even further.

I've known persons who never got over....in their marriage or neighborhood or family or friendship....a grudge and resentment. Stuck in that rut for their whole lives....it shaped relationships. Might it not be an option to just step on the train of forgiveness and head for the land of freedom in Christ where old hurts are healed. That takes some courage, it feels dangerous, or risky.

I've known misers, and I can be a selfish as the next person. For thus of us stuck fearfully feeling we can never have enough, bound up in the prison chains of greed and hoarding and selfishness....just step on the train of generosity. Start on the journey of the blessedness of giving, and being free of wasting every day of our lives worrying about the morrow. How many joyful today's I've wasted because I spent those hour worrying about tomorrow. Just step on the train of freely trusting the God of enough, and making it so for others. What moving words....when someone tells you....you were the way that in my need, God answered my prayer.

Leave behind the slavery of trusting the world and it's ways. If every day of my life is spent in the subtle selfishness of aiming to get what I want...that's a desert prison of dry bones.

So keeping it simple and practical....What if....in the bulletin you'd see that MDS needs someone for a week to help someone who has no hope at all for a simple house to replace the one destroyed in a storm? I'll leave my home and serve. Maybe every day for a lifetime, watching alertly for every opportunity to get on the train of service....out of the rut....getting on the train of service. Freedom in Christ. "Inasmuch as you did it for the least of these, you did it for me."

Or even more radical....standing at a crossroads. And will I hate my enemy, or choose another journey, and on the front of th at locomotive was: "love your enemy". Stay home....

What if today, July 4, every professing Christian in this nation said, "I want to be free in Christ. I want to cast off the spirits of our time that bind us to hatred. I'm going to get on the train of love...scary, risky, faithful?"

[complete ending to the sermon was somewhat extemporized, these are partial notes of how sermon ends---Tim]

I've mixed images and metaphors...I have one more. [something about Ruth and salvation....the train of salvation....our choices are recorded in the book of life not as a judgment record....but a book of life. A new heaven and a new earth.