

Rev. Phil Blackwell • October 25, 2015, Sermon Text  
Psalm 46; Mark 10:46-52

# Living Outside the Cage



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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When I was about four years old my parents took me to the Carle Clinic in Champaign-Urbana to have my eyesight tested. We were living in Danville, Illinois, at the time, where I was born. I sat down on pillows on a chair, looked through a large contraption in which the doctor dropped down different lenses for my left and my right eyes. With each combination he asked me, "Is the bird inside the cage or outside the cage?" Another set of lenses, then, "Now, is the bird inside the cage or outside the cage?"

Eventually, he discovered the best lens for each eye, and I have been wearing glasses with progressively stronger lenses ever since, and the question has stuck with me, "Is the bird inside the cage or outside the cage?" Presumably, the goal in that moment was to get the bird inside the cage.

For any of us who have had poor eyesight in our lives, the cry of blind Bartimaeus to Jesus is one we echo, "Teacher, I want to see." Mark continues his travelogue of Jesus moving among the people in towns and the countryside, and now we see him leaving Jericho with his disciples. A crowd is following him down the road when a blind man sitting off to the side hears the commotion. "What is happening?"

"It is Jesus of Nazareth, the miracle worker."

"Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy!" he shouts. The people around him tell him to be quiet, but he calls out again, "Son of David, show me mercy!"

Jesus stops and instructs his disciples, "Call him forward."

Now the people surrounding Bartimaeus encourage him, "Get up! He is calling you." The blind man throws off his coat, jumps up, and moves in the direction of Jesus' voice.

Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And he replies, "Teacher, I want to see."

Ultimately, Jesus finds a way to give Bartimaeus sight, without asking about a bird being inside or outside the cage, I suspect, and the man is set free to go on his way and see life for himself. So, to reverse the image: Bartimaeus has been released from the cage of blindness that had held him captive his whole life. Now outside the cage, he is free to move about and not be resigned to sitting alongside the road, free to put things into his own perspective, free to live life unfettered.

Maya Angelou, in her autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, tells us about her life growing up as a black child in the South last century: raped at 8 years old, disregarded, belittled because of race and gender. The title draws upon an image from a poem by a black poet of a generation earlier, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Maya Angelou also wrote her own poem about a caged bird yearning to fly free simply entitled, "Caged Bird." Her wistful first verse:

A free bird leaps  
on the back of the wind  
and floats downstream  
till the current ends  
and dips his wing  
in the orange sun rays  
and dares to claim the sky.

But then, by contrast she describes the bird entrapped inside the cage as seldom seeing through "his bars of rage, his wings are clipped and his feet are tied, so he opens his throat to sing."

And what is the song of the caged bird?

The caged bird sings  
with a fearful trill  
of things unknown  
but longed for still  
and his tune is heard  
on the distant hill  
for the caged bird  
sings of freedom.

The bird inside the cage sings of the freedom of living outside the cage.

Today is Reformation Sunday in the Protestant world. We celebrate the courageous faith of a German monk who forced his way outside of the cage of the Established Church and set us free to see and to hear for

ourselves. To be a Protestant Christian, a “protest-ant,” is to participate in a persistent protest against all forms of engagement, a protest that began 498 years ago.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed to the door of a church in Wittenberg a list of 95 complaints against the hierarchy in Rome. In his perception, the Church had become so corrupt and powerful, so ensnared by the selfish interests of the wealthy, that it had engaged the peasants, the vast majority of the people. He basically risked forcing open the door himself in order to let the common folks see for themselves, hear for themselves, sing for themselves the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of his most cage-breaking efforts was to make available to all who could read the scriptures in the vernacular. What a revolution! Power to the people; the power of interpretation to the people. The Bible was not for the priests to tell the people what was in it; the text was to speak directly to the hearts of the people. And it already had been translated into German. What a combination – Luther and Gutenberg! This became a defining thesis of Luther’s protest – that the Church must affirm “the priesthood of all believers.”

Of course, this got Luther into trouble. Breaking open cages to allow people to live freely outside is never popular with those entrusted with keeping the cages locked. He was summoned by the tribunal of the Church and commanded to recant. He replied, “Unless I am convicted of errors by the testimony of the Scriptures . . . to which I have appealed, and my conscience is taken captive by God’s Word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe for us, nor open to us. Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.” (Hie stehe ich. Ich kan nicht anders. Gott helff mir. Amen.)

“Here I stand,” standing outside of the open cage, calling for others to follow him to the freedom that God’s grace grants over our humanly contrived law. The Reformation, of which all Protestants are a part, we “protest-ants,” is a persistent protest for liberation.

As it turned out, Luther did not stand alone. Once the cage was opened by putting the scriptural texts into the hands of the people, there was no going back into the cage. A life of faith in God must be lived outside the cage.

Yet, we know that the human tendency through history is always to build new cages. Our Methodist heritage stands with one foot in the Roman Catholic tradition and one foot in the Reformation tradition. We grew out of the Church of England which separated from Rome not over theology but over politics. King Henry VIII wanted to get married again . . . and again, and again, and the Vatican said, “No.” So, Henry did what kings can do – he established his own church for his own purposes. And John Wesley was an ordained minister in that Anglican Church for his whole life.

But the Reformation took hold of Wesley’s vision; that is, he saw things like Luther in the sense that God’s grace was more compelling than human law. Wesley eventually stepped outside of the Anglican cage to live and preach among the common people of his world. And this was never more powerful than when he resisted the most villainous engagement of human history: slavery.

Go to Bristol in the southwest of England, and walk along the harbor that leads to the Bristol Channel and out to the Atlantic Ocean. This is where John and Charles Wesley felt most at home, where the Methodist movement started, where Charles lived and wrote his poetry; and this is where captured Africans were forced onto ships, transported to the colonies, and engaged in the slavery of an evil economy. John and Charles saw it, and they protested forcefully to the British Parliament. No politeness here about keeping religion out of politics. The politics of slavery was a religious issue.

In 1791, a week before he died at age 88, a feeble John Wesley wrote to William Wilberforce, a Member of Parliament who fought for abolition and a man to whom Wesley had ministered over the years: “I see not how you can go through your glorious enterprise in opposing that execrable villany, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature. Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them stronger than God? O be not weary of well-doing! Go on, in the name of God and in the power of His might, till even American slavery (the vilest that ever saw the sun) shall vanish away before it.”

A protesting voice singing outside the cage, part of the chorus of a persistent protest that began with Martin Luther breaking free and insisting that we follow.

Charles Wesley, for his part, wrote poems of the freedom resulting from God’s grace for people to sing. He also befriended John Newton, another hymn writer. Newton did not start out writing sacred songs; he was a slave trader. He repented of this sin, became an Anglican vicar, and wrote a testimony to his liberation in Jesus

Christ: “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.” Blind, but now I see; like Bartimeaus in the gospel account, set free to see God’s truth. We so often hear “Amazing Grace” sung as a sentimental song or as a secular nod in the direction of religiosity, but it really is a protest song, one appropriate for every moment in which people are being encaged. “Let my people go!” we sing.

The protest continues today, perhaps more in what we do than what we sing. Does slavery continue today? Yes, unfortunately, in some places, but what about the report released by the U.S. Department of Education last week? Which state has the largest gap in the graduation rates between white and black students? Mississippi? No. Alabama? No. Tennessee? No, it is Wisconsin. Yes, it partly is a result of a high graduation rate among white students, third in the nation; but, by comparison, we are 40<sup>th</sup> in the graduation rate of black students.

That is a cage which doors must be forced open. The song inside the cage is one of rage; the song outside the cage is one of grace. There are members of this congregation who have been working for months on devising a tutoring program to work with very young black students in Madison on their math and reading to help them get caught up with others at their level. I hope very soon that we will have a plan refined that will inspire many of us to get involved.

The homeless . . . it is getting cold outside, and we as people of faith keep pressing forward the best we can to change things. Three weeks ago after the city expelled people who were spending their nights on the front steps of the City – County Building, we read in the papers about a mother of two small children who sought an alternative space along State Street. She was assaulted; that was the end of the newspaper story. Here is the rest of the story: she came with her two children to our church to seek help. Tina Lang and Karen Andro from our staff used some emergency money made available to the ministers by the First United Methodist Church Foundation to place the family in a motel for a week. That gave time for our staff and those at Bethel Lutheran to make other arrangements, so that last week the mother tearfully thanked Karen because the family now has an apartment all of their own, and with Karen’s help, the children are back in school.

This is not just a nice story; this is reformation. This is the result of a persistent protest for which we give thanks to Martin Luther for starting, for John Wesley continuing, and for all of us keeping the faith. Living outside the cage . . . being free . . . setting other people free . . . singing a song . . . it is amazing grace, indeed. Amen.