**BREAKING FREE by the Rev. Ervin Graves**

**February 24, 2019**

Would you be in prayer with me. Heavenly and gracious Father, we come to you today in praise and in thanks for the many blessings that you have afforded us. Look upon us, O Lord, and let all the darkness of our souls vanish before the beams of your brightness. Fill us with holy love , and open our hearts and minds to the treasures of your wisdom. Help us unload the baggage of want, to the unfettered desire of being your servant, doing your work and being faithful to who we are in our community. All our desires are known to you, perfect what you have begun and what your spirit has awakened us to share. We ask this in your son’s holy name. Amen

 I know it is a simple question, but you have to ask your parishioners every once in a while – What do you get from the Bible? Is it comfort,? Is it peace? Is it forgiveness? Is it healing? Is it safety? Is it wholeness? Is it love and inclusion?

 Make no mistake about it there are many, many words and passages that have the capacity to make someone to be one of God’s disciples and who make the Bible their standard.

 There is upwards of 800,000 words in our Protestant version of the Bible, and over 31, 00 verses. It is a massive volume split into 66 books, with at least 40 different original human scribes.

 Do you think this book is a guidebook to perfection. Some would say yes. Does tis book have rules to live by that will protect us from experiencing or inflicting pain? Are the people who read it more perfect than they were before they knew what was in it? And what about the church – does this book have some magic formula that makes a communityof people nicer to one another, more enlightened, more spiritual, more prone to ensure each action is consistent with what God would do? Todays passages contain many instructions, given by various people to others who seek guidance. However , we should exercise some caution because we might miss the point if we read their words as a simple formula for living rather than a vision for who God is in our midst and what he obtrusively desires us to do for his church.

 So it means we may have to break free from some our previously held positions. We may have to do some things that might appear to be out of the box thinking.

 People get different things from the Bible, because there is diversity in there. Part of this influenced by what people are looking for when they approach it. The reader might be looking for comfort, for compassion in a time of personal trial. The Bible gives a variety of narratives, advice, courage, strength. Many of the passages are not new news or ideas, but responses to the wisdom and events of the times.

 First and foremost Jesus teaches his disciples that it’s not enough to love what is easy to love. We must love as God loves – as a gift freely given, regardless of the worthiness or response

I know that most of you have heard Haydn’s “ Lord Nelson Mass.” If you haven’t, when you do you will find it to be a brilliant and thrilling work. I was listening to it not long ago and learned it has nothing to do with Lord Nelson! If you do a search, you can find any number of coincidences connecting the Mass to Lord Nelson; the crushing of napoleon’s navy in the battle of the Nile on August 1, 1798, or the Admirals’ presence at a performance of the Mass in Haydn’s hometown in 1800, or the destruction of the Danish fleet in 1801, or Trafalgar and the securing of hegemony over the seas by the British fleet in 1805.

A brilliant Mass sung in church with a warrior’s name attached to it (yes, in church!), but a warrior nonetheless, who wreaked havoc on the navies of the French and Spanish and whose name became synonymous with Britain’s ruling of the high seas.

The question for us and there are always questions for the Christian -Are the Nelson types really the heroes of that or any other time? Is the clash of arms, the reigning of vengeance, the necessity to retaliate, the meting of vengeance to even the score, to punish your antagonist, to meet violence with violence, terror with terror an appropriate response for us. I saw on the news the other night Putin has threatened the United States – promising Russians both butter and missiles. Is any of this noble, celebrative, honorable?

 We witness that approach to human affairs working itself out among us all the time. Talk with a Serb, a Bosnian, a Rwandan, a Palestinian, an Israeli. Brood about it with those who talk Jihad, and in this day and age fly planes into skyscrapers, blow up subway trains, tie bombs to their waists, or lay bombs by the roadside to destroy those they call the “enemy.”

 I would venture to call it a “clash of civilizations,” – folks just not understanding what it takes to get along together – to be trustful and rely on honesty and truth. Former President, George W. Bush offered this as he witnessed the conflagration in the Middle East “Conflict is not inevitable. However, distrust need not be permanent. ***Peace is possible when we break free of old patterns and habits of hatred…”***

And he was right. He was biblical. Whoever wrote that sentence for him stole it right out of the Gospel of Luke. The sentence paraphrases, a declarative sentence, what Jesus so brilliantly illustrated in his references to vengeance and retaliation.

Do you remember? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from anyone who takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt.

There are those who would call it cowardice. Am I right? A milquetoast pacifism inviting some brutal aggressor to run over us with hobnailed boots? Is it surrender of self-respect, appeasement, guaranteeing we get wiped out with our neighbor, the city, the nation? It’s about breaking free. It’s not about being wimpish, weak, or impotent.

We all recognize how difficult Jesus’ message is to convey with mortars and missiles flying, cities in ruins, the gravestone business booming, the pounding of chest, and with the bloody “name game” flourishing in Jerusalem, Gaza, Baghdad, Europe, New York, Kabul, and Washington DC.

These visions of our Lord might appear to be absolutely absurd and laughingly ludicrous in a world where day by day Ground Zero seems demonically extended. One Marshall Rosenberg wrote: “Peace requires something far more difficult than revenge or turning the other cheek; it requires empathizing with the fears and unmet needs that provide the impetus for people to attack each other.”

The message is that there is an alternative. It’s an opportunity to reset the agenda, to recast the vocabulary, to redefine the means to an end, to reclaim the initiative, to reassert the dignity of adversaries, to make a meaningful search for alternatives and I do mean to search for the higher ground. Allowing space to work out areas of concern. That my brothers and sisters is what lies behind this stunning illustration of ethical behavior offered by our Lord.

It’s not only about our faith initiative and hope, but our intent. Understanding that to follow the Lord’s teachings requires courage and imagination. It is essential that the decision to respond not be passive, not be a victim, but equally aware of simply NOT reproducing what has been done to you. This is the power of a new agenda. That is breaking out and breaking free.

Breaking free from those bad habits we’ve engaged in for so long. No longer will you be stymied and held back for fear of incurring some unfavorable comment. Breaking free from domination. Breaking free from those self-imposed artificial restraints. Breaking free from the usual to the unusual. Breaking free from all the stuff you’ve been carrying

Around. See how lighter you’ll feel.

 Your attitude may change, your tone might change, your perspective might change, your life may change, you may change. O what a witness for the Lord

There is no doubt in my mind that the world could be a better place for all if we could just change the dynamic if one could BREAK OUT AND BREAK FREE..

 Put life first. My beloved, Luke’s vision shared with us says that we can live now from the profound conviction that is rooted in the divine love at the heart of the universe, (that’s god’s love) that when evil is done to us, somehow good may be a forthcoming response, allowing us to forge a blessing even for those who do us violence.

We recognize that this is not just a global issue, or a national issue, but it is an issue that we need to deal with it in our community and our churches.

The loftiness of the challenge which Jesus presents exalts us, lifts us with the sense of the glory of God, and in the same sense humbles us to the dust with the consciousness of our utter inability to measure up to the ideal he set before us as his disciples.

Yet we can begin with a thought which puts the law of love on a plane where at least we can admit its relevance to our daily choices and efforts. From where I sit, Jesus is not asking about our feelings and emotions because he knows that we cannot control them.. Jesus’ expression of love does not mean that we must first force ourselves to find all other persons congenial. Good luck with that! Nor does his love mean some artificially created sentiment.

To love is not necessarily to like. Surely God himself in his love, which is measureless and unconditioned cannot like everything he sees in his imperfect children to whom he gives himself. And God does see everything

 In Jesus’ summary of the great commandments of the law, he said that each one of us is to love his neighbor as himself. Well, how do we do that? We do not look in the mirror and think how amiable we are.

 To love ourselves is a much more practical and positive matter than that. It means to want for ourselves the very best that life can give and to reach out and try to get it. But that kind of self-love can be mean and cramping unless you are able to break free, unless it is enlarged by a pure and humble recognition of what the real values of life are and recognizing that these are the essential values in life that God would have us live by and lift up.

And that my beloved is what the love of one’s neighbor should mean. It is regarding him as worthy of all the best in life that God can help us make available for that neighbor.

And that’s part of our challenge hearing that gospel message. How do we sufficiently surmount our inertia of self concern. Getting our needs met.

How can we sufficiently overcome our quick impulse to resent injury, our anger, disagreement, our egos and pride and self-assertion, O and let’s not forget the slowness of our sympathy for others.

Try as we might to translate into actual conduct the kind of spirit Jesus has set forth in the illustrations in this Scripture will be painfully difficult. I would venture to say, WE CANNOT. I can make that assertion with a very high degree of confidence.

 We all can’t achieve that rare position of getting it right –all the time – even some of the time, truly living up to the ideals of Jesus’ teaching. We might suggest Francis of Assisi who left all the cluttering things of the earth behind; a Mahatma Ghandi who cleansed his heart from hate and any thoughts of violence.

Mother Theresa wasn’t wrong when she said, “ If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to one another.”

Even the least of us have glimpses of what that means. In the meantime, however, we can trust that Jesus who set that goal so high and far will have compassionate understanding for the slow steps of us who are such a distance from reaching those goals, provided our eyes are in that direction.

In the world of the Nonviolent Communication movement , we need to challenge ourselves to live like a giraffe: big hearted and standing tall enough to look over the chaos with our big hearts, rather than get embroiled in it.

 May we pray that our big giraffe hearts be filled with compassion and understanding and may we look at each other with the mercy and the same unconditional love God offers us.

Remember that Jesus continually pushes his followers to greater and greater depths of compassion and to higher and higher visions of love and inclusion.

And let’s not forget that sometimes the path to holiness, the way to offer mercy is not by what we do but by what we do not do.

Let Jesus know today that you understand how much he needs you; Let him know you stand with him eager to discard all false pretenses BREAKING FREE while acknowledging that your hope is in Him. May his name be praised.

And yes, what of the brilliant church oratorio, The Lord Nelson Mass?” Lord Nelson – that noble admiral, that consummate warrior. Do you know what Haydn originally named this Mass? Not Lord Nelson. He called it “missan angustis” Translated – (Mass in Time of Tribulation)

Thank you Franz Joseph. In these troubled times we can listen and feel you wrote it just for us. Amen