

“Remembering the Sacrifices of Freedom”

Acts 16:16-34

Pastor James York

May 25, 2014

It is gratitude that prompted an old man to visit an old broken pier on the eastern seacoast of Florida. Every Friday night, until his death in 1973, he would return, walking slowly and slightly stooped with a large bucket of shrimp. The sea gulls would flock to this man, and he would feed them. Many years before, in October, 1942, Captain Eddie Rickenbacker was on a mission in a B-17 to deliver an important message to General Douglas MacArthur in New Guinea. But there was an unexpected detour, which would hurl Captain Eddie into the most harrowing adventure of his life. Somewhere over the South Pacific the plane became lost beyond the reach of radio. Fuel ran dangerously low, so the men ditched their plane in the ocean. For nearly a month Captain Eddie and his companions would fight the water, and the weather, and the scorching sun. They spent many sleepless nights recoiling as giant sharks rammed their rafts. But of all their enemies at sea, one proved most formidable: starvation. Eight days out, their rations were long gone. It would take a miracle to sustain them. And a miracle occurred. In Captain Eddie's own words, "Captain Cherry, read the service that afternoon, and we finished with a prayer for deliverance and a hymn of praise. There was some talk, but it tapered off in the oppressive heat. With my hat pulled down over my eyes to keep out some of the glare, I dozed off. When something landed on my head, I knew that it was a seagull. I don't know how, I just knew. No one said a word, but peering out from under my hat brim without moving my head, I could see the expression on their faces. They were staring at that seagull. The seagull meant food...if I could catch it." Captain Eddie caught the seagull. It was eaten. Its intestines were used for bait to catch fish. The survivors were sustained and their hopes renewed, because a lone sea gull, uncharacteristically hundreds of miles from land, was sacrificed. Captain Eddie never forgot. Every Friday evening, about sunset on a lonely stretch along the eastern Florida seacoast you could see an old man walking white-haired, bushy-eyebrowed, slightly bent; his bucket filled with shrimp to feed the seagulls, to remember that one which, on a day long past, gave itself without a struggle...like manna in the wilderness.

It is with gratitude this weekend that we remember the sacrifices of those who fought for freedom. By remembering we show our thanks and appreciation. By serving with love we perpetuate their service.

Paul and Silas remembered the sacrifice of Jesus who gave them freedom. Everyday Paul and Silas went to the place of prayer in gratitude, to give thanks to God for the work of Jesus that sets them free from the bondage of sin and death. Remembering and prayers of thanksgiving were not enough for Paul and Silas for they became servants of the Most High God proclaiming the way of salvation wherever they went. It was their actions that spoke volumes and backed up their message of salvation. Francis of Assisi once said, “Everywhere you go,

preach the gospel. Use words if necessary.” **Acts 16:16-34** **“One day as we were going down to the place of prayer, we met a demon-possessed slave girl. She was a fortune-teller who earned a lot of money for her masters. She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved.” This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And instantly it left her. Her masters’ hopes of wealth were now shattered, so they grabbed Paul and Silas and dragged them before the authorities at the marketplace. “The whole city is in an uproar because of these Jews!” they shouted to the city officials. “They are teaching customs that are illegal for us Romans to practice.” A mob quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the city officials ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden rods. They were severely beaten, and then they were thrown into prison. The jailer was ordered to make sure they didn’t escape. So the jailer put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet in the stocks. Around midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening. Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off! The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. 28 But Paul shouted to him, “Stop! Don’t kill yourself! We are all here!” The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.” And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.”**

Is your remembrance of those who sacrificed for your freedom and the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus giving up his life on the cross for you stirring you into action? Christine Radano writes “Sharing the gospel is not so much a matter of words, but most important, of deeds. It is not sufficient to “feel” love for God. Love is not just a feeling. Love is also a daily reality, a mathematical demonstration! Love needs not just to be said it also needs to be done.” On the road the Levite spoke about his love for God, but the Good Samaritan showed it. This memorial day I challenge you to remember the sacrifices of those who have fought and are fighting for our country. I also challenge you to remember all those who put love into action to set people free. For those who work to free others from the bondage of abuse, economic status, insufficient education, accidents, addictions, social injustice, loneliness, violence or any type of oppression. Remember and give thanks for those who serve to rid the world of anything that diminishes any person. In remembering those who have fought for freedom I hope your gratitude stirs you into action. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “We all can be great, because we all can serve.” Perhaps the

greatest way we can honor those who have sacrificed for our freedom is for us to pay forward their love expanding freedom throughout the world.

Our scripture lesson tells about people who were in bondage and people who were free. Paul provided freedom for a slave girl and the result was that he and Silas found themselves in prison. Their reaction to having their feet put in stocks in the dark and dreary innermost cell is that they sang hymns to God. When an earthquake shook the doors open and cracked the mortar releasing the chains that held their feet, they did not run for their life; but rather, they told the jailer about Jesus. It appears that Paul and Silas are the ones in bondage; but in reality, they are the ones who are truly free. Paul and Silas realize that no one can take their freedom away, because freedom is a gift given by God.

The jailer is not free for when he sees that the prison doors are opened he is certain Paul and Silas have escaped. Knowing the penalty for jailers who allow a prisoner to escape, he draws his sword and prepares to do the honorable thing for disgraced jailers. Having the key to someone else's cell does not make you free. Iron bars do not a prison make. Paul shouts, "Don't do it. We are all here singing praises to God." The jailer says, "But you were bound in chains and now you are free to escape." It is ironic Paul and Silas were the ones who were spiritually free and the jailer was the real prisoner of sin and an oppressive government. The jailer asks, "What do I have to do to be saved? What do I have to do to be free?" Paul answers, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved and truly free." The jailer and his family were all baptized, and they rejoiced in their newfound salvation and freedom.

Freedom is not always what it first appears. At the end of our scripture, everyone who at first appeared to be free – the girl's owner, the judges, the jailer – are all slaves and everyone who first appeared to be enslaved – Paul, Silas, and the poor girl – are free as well as the jailer who becomes free after his conversion. Jesus said, "I am the truth and the truth will make you free." Jesus' sacrifice gave freedom to Paul and Silas. They embodied this freedom which set the jailer free. Elaine Roulet commented, "Our changed lives might be the only gospel some people will ever read".

Recently I watched a movie about Nelson Mandela. Despite Nelson's imprisonment his spirit was free for he was filled with peace, hope, forgiveness for those who imprisoned him, and love for all people. Those who imprisoned Nelson were wrecked in bondage. Their hate tormented them. Their fear destroyed their life. Their bitterness confined them.

Memorial Day is a weekend to remember and give thanks for the many people who have fought for freedom; a day to remember that we are still at war today. Right now and tomorrow while you may be enjoying a day of food and leisure there are men and women eating bland rations, enduring sweltering heat, and abrasive sand. They are risking their lives every second often unsure where the next sniper, bomb, or threat is lurking. Remember people like Martin Luther King Jr. who fought to free people from racism. Remember Mother Teresa who fought to free people from dying alone, uncared for, and unprayed for. Remember Doris York who spent hours everyday teaching her son to help him overcome his disability. Remember Dawn Zuber, a third grade teacher, who encouraged her students filling them with a desire to make a difference.

Who are the people, who out of love, sacrificed to give you freedom? Maybe a friend who gave you money when you were in need. Maybe a parent who worked extra hard, so you could enjoy something. Maybe a teacher who spent extra time to help you get your education. Maybe a coach who helped you give your all while having fun. Maybe a musician who filled you with passion for bringing joy to others through music. Maybe a waitress who served you with a smile enabling you to enjoy a leisurely meal.

We are surrounded by people who sacrifice to give us freedom. Counselors who free people from struggles. Food shelf workers who free people from hunger. Health care workers who free people from health ailments. Dayton Avenue Clothing ministry that gives someone a suit, that gets them a job, that gets them out of poverty, and enables them to get their family back in a home. The account of those who sacrifice for freedom goes on and on.

Many of us will celebrate a graduation. As a parent this is your invitation to set your child free, to let go, to sacrifice your desire to control or direct his or her life. As the graduate, it is your invitation to thank your parents, honor them by making wise choices, by serving, by loving, by passing on their love for you to others.

Remember with gratitude those who sacrificed to make your life and our world better, freer and more loving. Remember with gratitude Jesus who sacrificed his life on a cross for each of us, so we can have abundant, eternal life in heaven. Take time to remember, to be inspired. Then out of gratitude follow their example. Find a way to lovingly serve, to make the world more like heaven, freer, and more loving. Honor those who have sacrificed for you by being fully alive, grateful, and serving extravagantly. Scripture proclaims. **1 John 3:16 “We know love by this, that Jesus laid down his life for us and we ought to lay down our lives for one another”**. Certainly dying for another is the ultimate sacrifice; yet, there are many other ways to lay down our lives for others, to choose to sacrifice time, money or pursuits, to lay them down and with love investing in another giving them freedom. To choose to lay down your desire to change or control another, so they are free to discover who they are and their beauty.

Soldiers, visionaries, and freedom fighters are under constant attack. Our lives will be attacked by tragedy, broken relationships, and eventually death. Paul and Silas were ready for their attackers, because they clung to the freedom and peace that only Christ can provide. They knew Jesus would never leave or forsake them. They knew the battle was already won, that love in the end prevails. They knew their future was secure that nothing could ever separate them from God’s love. They knew their future was secure, that they would celebrate a glorious eternal life in heaven. They remembered with gratitude that all of this was accomplished by the sacrifice of Jesus for them and for us. Grateful remembrance inspired them to boldly serve, to courageously love. Remember Jesus and all who have sacrificed and are sacrificing to give you freedom. With grateful remembrance love, serve, and continue their legacy. Amen