

Feb. 12, 2006
Matthew 25:31-40
First Parish Church
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Visions of Freedom

This morning, we've heard the story of Harriet Tubman (from Jacob Lawrence's, *Harriet and the Promised Land*.) Now I want to tell you about another woman, who lived at the same time, and who also fought against slavery. This woman was a white woman. She was a housewife right here in Brunswick. One hundred and fifty five years ago, she had recently moved to Brunswick. She and her family lived in a house a couple of blocks away on Federal Street. She was spending a lot of time fixing up their house, and had recently given birth to her seventh child. She was also a woman of the church and regularly attended worship. She had grown up with a father who was a famous preacher and her brothers were all preachers. If she had been a boy, she would have been expected to be a preacher, as well.

At the time, this woman's heart was heavy because she was deeply concerned about the practice of slavery in this country. There was a new law called the Fugitive Slave Act. With this new law people in the northern states were told they had to return run away slaves to their owners in the south. Some people refused to do so. This woman and her family disobeyed the law. They were part of the "Underground Railroad" here in Brunswick. She wondered what else she should do.

Well, this woman had a gift for writing. She had already had some of her writings published. One of her sisters-in-law had written to her recently talking about the evils of slavery and wrote, "Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that will make this whole nation feel what a accursed thing slavery is." (*The Beechers*, Rugoff, pg. 319) Hattie's children remembered that when she got this letter, she stood up with the letter in her hand, and declared, "I will write something."

So when she came to church on March 2, 1851, her mind was active and her spirit was searching. She was sitting in pew 23, which belonged to her friends the Uphams. After the regular service she stayed for the communion service, which was a separate service held immediately after the morning service.

The passage of scripture that was most in her mind those days, she said, was the gospel lesson I read a few moments ago, *Whenever you do it unto the least of these, you do it unto me*. In other words, the way to welcome and care for the Jesus is to welcome and care for those in need.

She said that she had a vision that day. The image of the death of an old, faithful slave came vividly to her consciousness. She named that man, Uncle Tom. After

the service she hurried home and wrote the scene down on brown wrapping paper left over from groceries because that was all she had at the moment. In the weeks and months ahead she wrote down other “pictures” that came to her about Uncle Tom and another character, Eliza. I suspect most of the adults here today know who this woman was, but maybe some of you young people don’t know. This woman’s name was also Harriet. She was Harriet Beecher Stowe and the book she had begun was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Her book had an enormous impact on the American public, stirring up and supporting the anti-slavery movement to the extent that supposedly when President Abraham Lincoln met her during the Civil War, he said to her, “So this is the little lady that made this great war.” Harriet Beecher Stowe didn’t start the Civil War, but she did help her white readers see slaves as real people.

Both of the Harriets we have remembered today – Harriet Tubman and Harriet Beecher Stowe had visions of freedom. They had faith that God did not intend for people to be slaves. On the surface, each of them is an unlikely prophet -

- A black woman who was a slave
- And a white woman who was raising six children.

But they each used the gifts they had to make a difference.

Harriet Tubman was physically strong (partly from working in the fields as she was growing up) and she was courageous. The combination of these two – strength and courage – helped her to make 19 trips back to the south and

lead over 300 people to freedom. She was “Moses” to her people.

Harriet Beecher Stowe had the gift of drawing pictures with words. As a writer, she used this gift in the ways she believed God had called her to speak up against the evils of slavery.

Each of these women acted on the belief that the way to welcome and care for Christ is to welcome and care for those in need.

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Prophets and visionaries are not just from long ago. I want to mention one local group and one person, with an international focus, from today’s time.

The local visionaries are right here at Brunswick Jr. High School on the Civil Rights Team. There was an article about them in last Monday’s *Times Record*. Included in the article are two youth affiliated with First Parish Church – Brittany Rowe and Ellen Wise. (I’ve also learned that Caroline Wild and Jessica Granholm are involved.)

This group of students has a vision of freedom from bullying. They wear wristbands that say, “Those that stand for nothing will fall for anything.” The team helps students learn strategies for speaking up for themselves and one another when they experience bullying.

On the international scene is a surprising prophet. He is the lead singer of the U2 rock band. His name is Bono. He is the founder of the ONE campaign. My daughter Karin first introduced me to his vision of freedom and gave me this white wristband with the word, ONE, on it. His vision of freedom is freedom

from extreme poverty for the world's impoverished.

freedom from bullying, freedom from extreme poverty.

One of you sent me an email this week with the speech that Bono recently gave at the National Prayer Breakfast, where President Bush and Congressional leaders were in attendance. I want to share with you just a couple of the things he said that relate to our faith tradition.

I wonder what visions God is giving to us?

It's not a coincidence that in the scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It's not an accident. That's a lot of air time, 2,100 times. (You know, the only time Christ is judgmental is on the subject of the poor.) 'As you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me' (Matthew 25:40). As I say, good news to the poor.

He goes on to say that dealing with extreme poverty is not simply a matter of charity; it's about justice and equality.

You know, think of those Jewish sheep-herders going to meet the Pharaoh, mud on their shoes, and the Pharaoh says, "Equal?" A preposterous idea: rich and poor are equal? And they say, "Yeah, 'equal,' that's what it says here in this book. We're all made in the image of God."

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Unlikely prophets and visionaries:

- A slave woman
- A housewife raising six children
- A group of Jr. High students
- An international rock star

Yet, they all responded to visions of freedom – freedom from slavery,