

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

After arguing a brilliant case and receiving a favorable verdict the attorney leaned over to his client, the defendant and said, "Now that you have been acquitted of all charges, tell me truly, Are you guilty?" The client looked at his lawyer and said, "I thought I was- no, I'm sure I was, but after hearing your amazing argument in court this morning, I am beginning to think that I am innocent after all!"

While arguments may be compelling at times, it often takes a lot to really change our minds on an issue or belief. We often believe our opinion or viewpoint to be ultimate truth (or at least the best version of the truth in circulation). We humans also tend to gravitate toward black and white thinking when a new concept or idea conflicts with something that we held as fact. Our idea is right and the new idea if rejected as wrong outright, is at least to be held in suspicion. It is only when we humbly acknowledge that our knowledge is finite however that we can begin to know anything at all. And while in the political arena changing one's mind might be regarded as flip-flopping and could cost a candidate an election, it is actually a sign of intellectual maturity, wisdom and the mark of a great leader. Edward de Bono the Maltese Psychologist and Writer, and a leading authority in field of creative thinking once said, "If you never change your mind, why have one."

Today's readings from Holy Scripture pushes us to expand our minds, suspend our opinions and to be radically open to learning something new just as it pushed those who first encountered these words as a part of the oral tradition before it was recorded for our benefit. In Isaiah we hear words of hope which may not be easily embraced. In James, we are pushed to understand faith as a verb and in the Gospel we see teachers becoming students and social outcasts playing the role of sage. Before we jump into the lessons, I want to open our minds a little more by sharing an old story that has helped me do the same.

Once upon a time there was a farmer that had a small farm in a quiet country village. While the farm wasn't very big, he was able to plant enough crops to feed himself and his family and sell some of the surplus to take care of other necessities. He had a loyal old mule that pulled the plow and enabled him to till plant and harvest his crops. His mule also pulled his cart full of produce into town and took his family to the country church on Sunday. One labor day, the small village decided to have a celebration in the village square with a pig roast, and music and in the evening, fireworks. Well no one told the old mule about the fireworks and when they began he was dosing in the field next to barn. He awoke and was quite convinced that the world was ending as he saw the sky light up and heard the thundering booms. He knew it wasn't thunder and lightening because the sky was otherwise clear and all of the stars and the moon were visible. So the old mule did what anyone would do, he started to run as fast as he could in a panic. Because it was dark in the field the old mule did not see the old well and he plunged down the hole. The water had dried up, years ago, and amazingly the mule was unhurt in the fall. The next day the farmer searched high and low for the old mule and heard a faint braying coming from the well. He called together two of his friends from the village after he decided he could not rescue the animal alone. One friend said, "Hopeless" the other said, "Impossible", so the three of them decided to put the mule out

of its misery quickly by burying it. As they heaved the contents of their shovels down the hole, the old mule felt what he imagined to be a light shower of dirt and he shook his back and the dirt gathered around his hooves. He then stomped a bit on the dirt and he noticed he was about an inch higher than he was before. As the dirt keep coming, he kept shaking and inch by inch, you get the picture a hopeless situation is overcome. The impossible became possible and hope replaced hopelessness. (Burns, George W, 101 Healing Stories... John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, NJ, 2005 pg 56)

This past week in the news we heard the disturbing story of Jaycee Lee Dugard, who was abducted from a bus stop in 1991 when she was 11 years old and held captive for 18 years in a backyard shack, by her captors, Nancy and Phillip Garrido. She and the two children are now free, but she most likely did not escape earlier due to a condition known as Stockholm Syndrome a psychological phenomenon named after a kidnapping event that occurred on August 24, 1973 at the Sveriges Kreditbank, one of the largest banks in Stockholm, Sweden, where four abductees developed a bond with their captors. The bond begins with a sense of gratitude toward the captor for not being killed and then progresses to a trust and the belief that the captors actually have the victim's best interest in mind. A resistance of being rescued develops along with a distrust of would be rescuers. Finally the victim usually begins to adopt the captor's perspective and eventually there is no desire for escape.

Sometimes we also develop unhealthy bonds with repressive cultural and societal forces and ideologies. We befriend demonic behaviors, exploitative policies and violent and destructive practices. We get comfortable or we believe that we are powerless to change anything or worse yet we start to adopt these unwanted perspectives as our own. How do we achieve liberation when we can become so entrenched in sin?

In the first lesson, we encounter a portion of Isaiah called Deutero- Isaiah, which was probably penned at the end of the exilic period. If you recall the Southern kingdom of Judah was conquered by King Nebuchadnezzar II of Babylon in 586 BCE shortly thereafter Jews were taken captive to Babylon. There they were taunted and encouraged to give up their culture, traditions and even their God. It was as if they too were in the bottom of a dry well for nearly fifty years. Then something unexpected happened, the Persian Empire, conquered Babylon and in 538 BCE the Persian ruler Cyrus the Great gave Jews permission to return to their homeland and more than 40,000 Jews started walking home.

Today's text addresses these weak and scared just released captives and tells them to be strong and not to fear. Easier said than done! That is like telling someone that just experienced a gut wrenching loss that they will get over it! Then the text goes on to say that the desert is going to bloom, and the blind will see, the deaf will hear, the dumb will sing and the lame will leap.... The reason Isaiah gives for all of these blessings to be possible is because God will be right along side God's people and when God is with you justice happens, healing happens, forgiveness happens, love happens, and hope happens. It must have been hard to hear this good news and accept it. After a couple of generations it must have been hard for many to leave what they considered to be their

home in Babylon. To make matters worse, when they did arrive home they had a lot of work to do because the place was a wreck.

How do we react when we hear good news about our freedom in Christ? Don't we too struggle hard to believe it at times? Do we feel as if we are still in the throes of oppression? Have we grown too accustomed to being held captive that we reject freedom?

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is an action figure. He is constantly on the go and wherever he goes he challenges perceptions and invites those around Him to experience true freedom. Jesus used his entire self and every situation to teach. Earlier in Mark, Jesus challenges the Jewish purity laws pertaining to food and eating, and now he challenges the notion of who is "in" and who is "out." The text says that Jesus went into Tyre, not a place known for its Jewish population. There a Syrophonecian women came and begged at his feet for healing for her daughter. Already we have a scandalous encounter before we even get to the controversial dialogue. A gentile woman approaches a Jewish man. Cultural restraints on both sides would make that a no-no for gender and religious reasons. Jesus seems to hold up that rejection and basically refers to her as a puppy, a little dog and says I have come to nourish the children of God not the doggies. Her response is clever and humble, but she points out that even the lowly dogs get the scraps from the table. Some say this is a learning moment for Jesus since he seems to change his mind. I am not so sure if he actually changes his mind based on the rest of Mark's gospel, but I know he got everyone around him thinking. The event functions like a cerebral can opener. Notice Jesus begins to respond to her original request traditionally, as any Jewish Rabbi of his day might. If he was to accept her right away, it may have offended his disciples and they may have run off or closed their minds and hearts to what was happening. The mark of a good teacher however is to model for the students what is acceptable and right. Jesus shows his disciples, he shows us, that we can change our preconceived notions, especially when it comes to God's grace and who it is designed for. Jesus starts with a rejection, but then embraces her and her request. This gentile is not an outsider to God, but an insider to whom and with whom God is present and when God is with you justice happens, healing happens, forgiveness happens, love happens, and hope happens. God was also with another Gentile noted earlier, Cyrus the Great whom God used to bring hope in releasing the Jews.

So what about us? If James is a straw epistle as Luther once noted well this passage is the needle in that hay stack. James really sticks it to us and says if we believe God's liberation for us then we are to live it not only for ourselves, but for every one of God's children. We can't leave anyone in a well and say, "Impossible!" "Hopeless!" If we are not being held captive and we have enough food to eat and adequate medical care, we can't rest from our labor until our neighbor is also free, nourished and healthy for if we do our faith is dead. If we judge someone as unworthy of our effort, we judge ourselves. James defines faith as a verb and we are being called into action now. But how can we love and accept, liberate and even celebrate those who differ most from us? How can we accept people of differing ethnicity, people of differing political views,

from different socioeconomic backgrounds, of a different gender, of a different sexual orientation, or even those with a different religion?

We can because God is with us and when God is with God's people justice happens, healing happens, forgiveness happens, love happens, and hope happens.

If there is an issue that you are struggling with today, or a well that you seem to be in, or if you know a neighbor, a sister, a brother or any other child of God that is hope starved, take a page out of the Syrophonesian woman's play book and seek Jesus' help. Let us get on our knees a little more often and ask for healing, strength and the power to change the fate of others and to let God continually transform our minds and hearts. Then let us rise in the sure and certain hope of our baptismal promise, the promise that God walks with us, and in the strength of the Spirit and let us remember that while we are not innocent, we have been acquitted and forgiven.

Brothers and Sisters we are free to love and serve the Lord and all of God's children because God is indeed with us and when God is with us justice happens, healing happens, forgiveness happens, love happens, and hope happens. Amen.