

LIBERATED BY LOVE

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Emmanuel

By Guest Pastor Joanne Nugent-Ward

Jesus liberated the man possessed by a demon in today's Gospel because of love. He loved the possessed man, he loved the people witnessing this miracle and he hated the evil the devil enacted upon the man. Jesus was not always a gentle teacher of love. Sometimes his love came out in anger, for example, when he says to Peter "Get behind me Satan". Peter did not want to hear that Jesus was going to suffer and die and rise again. Somehow, Peter missed the Resurrection part, but that is probably because he was stuck on the suffering and death about which Jesus spoke. Jesus also clears the Temple of the money changers – those who would turn the place of God's presence into a place of commerce and profit.

Jesus addressed the evils of his world without a thought for his own safety because that was one of his missions.

I think that in today's world we tend to forget that Satan is real. We don't hear much about evil in today's mainstream Christian writings or teachings. It is perhaps an over-reaction to the fire and brimstone many of us grew up with in our childhood churches. But, evil is real in our world. In the past few weeks we have seen three obvious news stories that depict evil in our nation. In Baltimore, a woman was wheeled out of a hospital wearing nothing but a hospital gown and left at a bus stop in the frigid evening temperatures. Thirteen children were rescued from their own home, a place that is supposed to be safe and comfortable, from parents who tortured them and starved them, parents who are supposed to ensure their protection from such evil. And just this Wednesday, there was another school shooting in Kentucky where two 15 year olds were killed and 18 others were injured. Not to mention the constant barrage of sexual abuse and harassment charges that have been in the news for months. It is important, as Christians, not to sweep these horrific actions under the rug.

In the wider world, evil is evident in the rush of refugees leaving their homes because of elements like ISIS or regimes that are persecuting their own people, terror attacks and the lack of resources for the poor.

What can we do in our corner of the world to address these evils? Prayer is the number one action we can take to combat evil of any kind. In order to be effective in taking other actions, prayer has to be our foundation. What issues make your Halleluias stick in your throats?

Is it Poverty – The UCC is part of a statewide program called the Poor People’s Campaign. Our Human Rights Group here at Emmanuel is learning about this program. See Kristen Tooley for more information. Also, The Labor-Religion Campaign in NYS is chaired by Rev. Emily Mc Neil, who is also our minister in the NYS Conference in charge of Justice and Peace ministries. Sometimes poverty is difficult to deal with because it is uncomfortable. The problem seems bigger than we can handle by ourselves. That’s why

the Urban Mission helps those who need a leg up. When was the last time you brought something in for the food pantry and put it in the offering? You might ask – what difference will my little bit do? It will make a big difference to a hungry child. This is a wonderful way to directly impact hunger and poverty right here at home. If that does not seem like enough, another way might be to volunteer at the Urban Mission.

Is it **Racial inequality** – one of our Conference Ministers, Rev. Marsha Williams has a great program on white privilege of which we could take advantage. There are also resources on the UCCNY website – uccny.org. More personally, we can make a conscious effort to be aware of the different ways we greet people when we are in public. Be mindful of treating all people, whether they are people of color or Caucasian in the same way. If this is difficult to do, then perhaps you might want to ask yourself why. Is there a part of me that is racist to some degree? Do I feel superior to others? If so, do not feel guilty – change it. Becoming aware of

inner racism is the first step to changing your attitudes and behaviors

Does the plight of Refugees make Halleluias stick in your throat – while it is important for national security to limit immigration, as we have done for many years, to target or name call certain countries and people from them, is not the way we as a nation have historically dealt with refugees. Refugees flee from their countries because there is a crisis. We have been a nation which reaches out to people who need sanctuary. We could have blocked the Irish for example, because they could deplete our food sources, having come from a land of famine, or deny Germans refuge after WWII for fear that they could be Nazis. Ethnic Germans who fled to this nation due to the horrors of their nations' political policies were not turned away. We did not become a nation of Nazis either. Read up on those who are trying to enter our nation from war torn countries or who are fleeing ethnic cleansing today. Read about the sanctuary movement within our denomination as well as others to more deeply understand the

crisis people are experiencing and why they look to the US for safety and help. Get involved with an organization that is reputable.

Or, is it Homelessness – this is an evil which shows itself right here in our community. We might not see people living in the streets as in big cities, but our homelessness shows itself as people living in homes with members of their families whose homes are not adequate for the number of people living there. We also have a lot of couch surfing in Watertown – people going from one friend’s house to another, spending a week or two at each place they go because they either do not have a job or because their job does not pay enough to afford rent. In the warmer temperatures, it is not unusual to find people living under the bridges along the Black River or living in tents in the woods. I knew a family of 5 that had no housing in Carthage. They used a relative’s land to tent on as soon as it got warm enough every year and they lived in the woods until it snowed. That is why the Points North Housing Coalition was formed in our area. While there was no one sleeping in doorways on the Square, those of us who worked in counseling in the

city knew that people did not have permanent addresses. They could not find a job, were not able to work or their pay was not enough to afford rent. Social Workers and counselors got together help form the Points North Housing Coalition. Becoming involved in this organization is one way to participate in reducing homelessness in our region.

Whatever evil issue makes the Halleluias stick in your throat, there is a way to fight against it if we focus our efforts in prayer first.

Jesus, in today's Gospel gives us the example of combatting evil directly. He dispelled Satan from the man in the synagogue – a place where the people had gathered to pray. This was a great example of the authority Jesus had – Can you imagine your supply preacher exorcising an evil spirit from someone in front of you? I can't! But that is what the people saw as they were gathered to listen to Jesus preach that day! The man must have felt a sense of liberation and freedom after Jesus sent the evil spirit packing! Jesus' intent was twofold – to show his authority and to liberate

with love, the man who had been held captive by the Evil One. In Psalm 111 we read –“The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom” The FEAR of God! As I referred to earlier, those of us who grew up with hell fire and brimstone preaching knew how to fear God! What if the fear of the Lord isn't first of all an emotion, but an action, or a set of actions? Fearing the Lord means simply living by his precepts, putting God's will at the center of our lives and acting accordingly. Being wise, understanding how to live in the world, begins with being obedient. Life would be so much simpler, so much richer, so much happier, so much easier if we would just follow Jesus, who is the way, the truth and the life. How much more liberating that would be than to interpret the fear of God to be watch out cuz God's gonna get you!

In the same way, Jesus liberates us from evil and negative interpretations of God. If we can be prayerful people, striving to be Jesus hands, feet and voice in this life, then we have understood the call to work against evil, to be liberated by the love that Jesus came to show us. Let's continue to search for ways to defeat the evil in

our lives – basically, the things that are not life giving but are life taking. To defeat those things in our personal lives that prevent us from being who Jesus calls us to be is to be liberated – to be set free in order to accomplish the work of Jesus in our world, in our communities and within ourselves! May we work to relieve those things that keep Halleluias from being stuck in our throats!