



# “Proclaiming Liberty”

Text: Leviticus 25: 8-19

*a sermon by Kevin Scott Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It seems like more than an appropriate day to offer you a little history lesson. As your pastor, I am not required to offer you this lesson. But as a son of Pennsylvania, it is my duty.

It was on November 1, 1751, that a letter was received in London, from the Pennsylvania Assembly, sharing their desire to purchase a bell for the Pennsylvania State House in Philadelphia. The bell was ordered from Whitechapel Foundry and arrived in Philadelphia on September 1, 1752. The bell was hung up to try the sound on March 10<sup>th</sup>, and Isaac Norris, a Pennsylvania Assemblyman wrote: “I had the mortification to hear that it was cracked by a stroke of the clapper without any other violence as it was hung up to try the sound.” The cause of the break was thought to be the result of either a flaw in the casting or, as was thought at the time, of the bell being too brittle.

The bell was handed over the John Pass and John Stow, foundry workers in Philadelphia, who melted down the bell and added copper in an attempt to strengthen the bell. The new bell was raised to the belfry of the Statehouse on March 29, 1753. Pass and Stow had added too much copper and the sound of the bell was terrible.

Down the bell came again. Pass and Stow melted down the bell again and recast it. On June 11, 1753, up it went again, with the bell weighing 2080 pounds. And once again, there was general displeasure with the sound of the bell.

A new bell was ordered from the Whitechapel Foundry in England. When it arrived, there was general agreement that it sounded no better than the Pass and Stow bell, so the original remained in the steeple of the Statehouse and the Whitechapel bell was placed in a cupola on the Statehouse roof and attached to the clock to ring the hour.

The bell tolled on all manner of occasions, calling the Assembly together and summoning the people together for special announcements and proclamations. It rang so often that a petition was sent to the Pennsylvania Assembly, complaining of the noise and frequent ringing of the bell. (It seems they had issues with noise ordinances even back then.)

When the British occupied Philadelphia in 1777, all the bells in the city, including the bell from the Statehouse, were removed from the city. If left there they would have been melted down to make cannons. The Statehouse Bell was removed from the city and hidden in the floorboard of the Zion Reformed Church in Allentown. From 1790 to 1800, when Philadelphia was the nation's capital, the bell was in constant use.

As for the crack, it appears that the final expansion of the crack which rendered the bell unringable was on Washington's Birthday in 1846. It had been cracked before and repairs had been made. But the constant ringing on Washington's Birthday was, in fact, the death knell of the bell.

It was the bell that became an iconic symbol in 1837, when it was used as a frontpiece to an anti-slavery publication. It was the Abolitionists who gave the bell the name "Liberty Bell." Before that, it was simply called the Statehouse Bell.

Why did the bell become a symbol of liberty and freedom? It was not seen as such during the days of the Revolution, but became such in the days leading up to the Civil War. Why?

Because on the bell is an inscription from the Book of Leviticus. That inscription reads: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof." The choice of the quotation was made by Isaac Norris, a Quaker and member of the State Assembly.

When you read the verse in its context, you begin to notice something strange:

And you shall hallow the fiftieth year and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces.

The original bell, on which the same inscription appeared, was originally ordered to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of William Penn's "Charter of Privileges," which became Pennsylvania's original constitution. It was a jubilee bell and was to assist in "hallowing" the 50<sup>th</sup> year.

There's more to the Jubilee year than first appears.

In this year of jubilee you shall return, every one of you, to your property. When you make a sale to your neighbor or buy from your neighbor, you shall not cheat one another. When you buy from your neighbor, you shall pay only for the number of years since the jubilee; the seller shall charge you only for the remaining crop years. If the years are more, you

shall increase the price, and if the years are fewer, you shall diminish the price; for it is a certain number of harvests that are being sold to you. You shall not cheat one another, but you shall fear your God; for I am the Lord your God.

After seven cycles of sabbatical years, in which every seventh year the land is allowed to lie fallow and rest, the fiftieth year – following the seventh seven – is an extra year for the land to recover.

But, even more, it was a time when those who had fallen on hard times could have their freedom and property restored. Rabbi Richard Levy tells us:

In the Jubilee, the land reverts to its original owner, as a sign that the land belongs to no human being, but to God, who leases it to those who will till it. “The Land is Mine,” God proclaims in Leviticus 25:23, and “you are but sojourners and tenants with Me.” Human beings deserve to be redeemed from indenture, and land deserves to be redeemed from the human owners who use it, as opposed to God, who desires only that the product of the divine creation flourish and show forth all the potential that God sowed in it. In a sense, the law of the Jubilee acts as a bridle on God’s unlimited grant of dominion over the earth to the first human beings (Genesis 1:26)...

The Jubilee was a time when everything was reset. Property was returned to the original owner, who is God, debts were forgiven, the enslaved were freed, justice was done, peace was reestablished.

We don’t know if the Jubilee was ever fully instituted. Imagine the chaos if we tried doing that today! Imagine the socio-economic nightmare it would create!

But the message is clear: freedom and liberty are gifts of God that are to be enjoyed by all people. This isn’t like the conversations that pass for serious conversations about freedom and liberty today – about where you can and can’t smoke, how loud you can or can’t play music, what kind of gun you can or cannot own. Proclaiming liberty is about something much deeper, much more profound than we are sometimes willing to consider.

Proclaiming liberty has something to say about poor nations that are in debt to rich nations and are never going to be able to repay that debt without help. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about how we mistreat the poor in our own country. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about people working three and four minimum wage jobs and still not being able to afford safe and adequate housing. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about people being pre-judged as culpable and guilty simply because their skin contains more melanin than someone else’s. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about sentencing laws that incarcerate more and more people – and especially more and more people of color. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about a college student who leaves college and enters life with hundreds of thousands of

dollars in debt. Proclaiming liberty has something to say about the way women are treated in our society. Proclaiming liberty has something to say when the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Liberty, freedom, independence – use whatever word means the most to you – these are not just national aspirations. This is God’s will and intention for all people. Liberty, freedom, and independence are the by-product of justice and God is all about justice. Liberty, freedom, and independence are the visible sign of following that second greatest commandment – to love our neighbors as ourselves. Liberty, freedom, and independence are proof that we are living as God has called us to live and if liberty, freedom, and independence are missing, it is because God’s way has been rejected and discarded.

“And you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants...” That’s what the bell says and what it stands for. It’s housed today in a beautiful new building – the Liberty Bell Center, that was opened in October, 2003. It stands in front of Independence Hall – the old Pennsylvania Assembly Building – surrounded by glass walls which allow the Liberty Bell to be seen from the street every hour of every day.

On Wednesday, thirteen descendants of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence will gently tap the bell thirteen times to honor the signers. On Martin Luther King Day, the bell will be tapped again to mark a man who gave his life for liberty, freedom, and independence.

But it is up to all of us – as children of God – to “proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” It’s up to us – not as a political or civic responsibility (though it is most surely that). We proclaim liberty because it is a gift of God to all people. It is our calling to do justice, practice kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. It is our first duty to live as God’s own people and to ensure the blessing of God’s way of life for all people. It is our duty to proclaim true and authentic liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. For now and evermore. Amen.



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