

Counting the Cost
Rev. Kathleen Owens
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They were used to the heat in the day time...they had worked for years in the blazing sun, making bricks for the pyramids. Hard enough work but then Moses came and angered Pharaoh and they had to make them without straw. Then the plagues began – ten in all. The weirdest one was the one about the frogs – wow, could they smell! It was scary when it stayed dark for three days – but the worst was the final plague – when the Egyptians first born were killed. People were still talking about that one specifically. Walking in the dessert during the day was a lot like working in the sun building the pyramids – it was the cold nights that were really hard. That and the food – same ole meal all the time, water, quail and some strange-kind of bread. Walking across the sea was cool – but the food left a lot to be desired.

This is a story of the ancient Israelites as described in the Hebrew Scriptures in the book titled Exodus. You may be more familiar with the Hollywood version starring Charlton Heston as Moses. In the book, it takes 18 chapters to describe all the events and action until the people finally arrive at Mt. Sinai and start a new chapter in their story. For the first 18 chapters we know the Israelites as slaves – who experienced starvation, dehydration, pain and humiliation and some were worked to death. They longed for freedom and finally in Moses they had a leader who helped them leave their bondage and enter into a new way of life in a new place. And on the way to that new place, as our responsive reading says, they kept complaining and in the text it says some started remembering the good ole days in Egypt; in the traveling, they had forgotten how awful it had been; they started wishing that they had stayed there rather than face the unknown, it

was hard to trust when they couldn't see the way; eat a diet they couldn't stomach anymore. They wanted the security of the familiar rather than, as Desmond Tutu writes, bear the responsibilities and difficulties of freedom.

As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said in the read earlier, "Freedom has always been an expensive thing." In last week's sermon that talked about celebrating freedom, I mentioned then that this morning I would explore the fact that freedom comes at a cost. One of the readings last week was the opening part of the Declaration of Independence. I wanted to share with you a little more about the lives of the people who signed that document. It turns out that five signers were captured by the British as traitors, and tortured before they died. Twelve had their homes ransacked and burned. Two lost their sons serving in the Revolutionary Army; another had two sons captured. Nine of the 56 fought and died from wounds or hardships of the Revolutionary War. They signed the Declaration and they pledged their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. Twenty-four were lawyers and jurists. Eleven were merchants, nine were farmers and large plantation owners; men of means, well educated, but they signed the Declaration of Independence knowing full well that the penalty would be death if they were captured. Carter Braxton of Virginia, a wealthy planter and trader, saw his Ships swept from the seas by the British Navy. He sold his home and Properties to pay his debts, and died in rags. Thomas McKeam was so hounded by the British that he was forced to move his family almost constantly. He served in the Congress without pay, and his family was kept in hiding. His possessions were taken from him, and poverty was his reward. Vandals or soldiers looted the properties of many. At the battle of Yorktown, Thomas Nelson, Jr., noted that the British General Cornwallis had taken over the Nelson

home for his headquarters. He quietly urged General George Washington to open fire. The home was destroyed, and Nelson died bankrupt. Francis Lewis had his home and properties destroyed. The enemy jailed his wife, and she died within a few months. John Hart was driven from his wife's bedside as she was dying. His fields and his gristmill were laid to waste. For more than a year he lived in forests and caves, returning home to find his wife dead. (source for this is: <http://www.the7thfire.com/FREEDOM.htm>) Our own Universalist Benjamin Rush, a signer and a physician – his practice suffered a great deal.

What about us? I wonder if we knew what might happen, if we would have still signed that document. I want to think so. And yet...

Here in America we take our freedom seriously. Seventy-eight years after the Revolution this nation was at war again but this time, we fought each other. Approximately 2 million, 803 thousand fought on the Union side while 1 million, 64 thousand fought on the Confederate side. Those who died in combat, who were wounded in combat total to almost 600,000 and that doesn't count those who died of other causes during this war.¹

To date, this war has been the only one fought on American soil by its citizens. There were several reasons for the war. One outcome was the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. This document did not end slavery but it did lead to the creation of the 13th Amendment which did end slavery in the United States. In 1868 the fourteenth amendment was added and it says, "All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside. No state shall make or enforce any law which shall

¹ from the web site cwc.lsu.edu/cwc/other/stats/warcost.htm

abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” Powerful words – if they are acted upon. The fifteenth amendment, added in 1870 states: “The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.” And yet...and yet even as late in the 2004 national elections African Americans reported problems they, as a community, experienced when they tried to vote in the state of Ohio. These problems were similar to the ones experienced by this same community in the 2000 elections in the state of Florida. And we have another national election on the near horizon. In California alone, in 2008 as I understand it, this state will have three elections – a presidential primary in Feb., our state primary in June and then a national/state election in November. Some who are in politics are already wondering if we will have voter fatigue before November. Others are wondering if our state primary will have an even lower turnout because of the Feb national primary and some are worried about what might be passed in June because we’re so tired of voting and will not show up for the June election.

World War II – fighting fascism and imperialism – it was the war to end all wars – with over 400 thousand dead and over 600 thousand wounded, many citizens of the United States hoped this was it. And yet...it seems we have had more wars and conflicts in the last sixty years than ever before. And with reasons for the most recent ones based on faulty information at best, and down right lies at the worse, we have to wonder when

will the madness end? With 3,528 (as of June 17th) dead and over 25 thousand service members wounded, not counting psychologically speaking, men and women are sacrificing their lives, their families and the fundamental building blocks that create communities.

We sang the children to their classes this morning with the song, “You’re a Grand Ole Flag”...and it is, esp. the line that says “and forever in peace may you way.” That seems to be our challenge still in this new century and we are paying a price for freedom – we are paying with more than blood. The way it’s going, it seems to me that we are paying with our rights. It’s spun in a way that our rights are being sacrificed for freedom – but I think that’s just spin...it seems to me that our rights seem to be sacrificed so a few can have more control over many. Those precious, inalienable rights that are being scratched out all in the name of what...security? Lives lost is a high price for freedom and some people feel called to serve and do so willingly; let me say here it’s a complicated issue and one that this congregation is actively exploring. There is a peace and democracy group that hosts discussions on current topics concerning democracy and peace; we have a book group dedicated to reading and discussing texts and films about peace-making as part of our larger Association’s study of this issue; and we want to support our troops without supporting war; we want to honor folks who have served in the military and department of defense and create a safe space and welcoming atmosphere for genuine conversation and exploration. All of this is happening AND...the cost of lives lost in return for our security, for our loss of civil rights to maintain our system of “it’s always been this way”? It seems odd to me that we have people risking their lives to ensure freedom elsewhere as the rights that guarantee ours are restricted by

the Supreme Court and some are basically gone under the Patriot Acts I and II. The three branches of government, once set up as a way to monitor one another and keep each other in check, now seem to work in concert while more people live without adequate healthcare and are working two and three jobs to make ends meet. Sometimes living here can feel – well, it can be difficult and for some, they think the way out is to move to Canada. But if we do, who's left? The United States is my home and I don't want to move, I want the US to live up to its ideals. I want them to be a reality – in this land of the free.

This church, this beloved voluntary association is one way that helps us live in the complexity of our lives; to educate ourselves and each other and create a vision of a different way of life. In this community we can hold one another gently accountable for living in a way that ensures freedom's continuance in this land. In this place we learn of our ancestors who have gone on before and worked and sacrificed for this land. We hear the stories, we learn of their efforts and we sing their songs because they inspire us. They fill us with the truth that we can and do make a difference. We come together in this community because we find refuge in our numbers and gather strength for the coming day.

The stories in the ancient texts, like the one from the Hebrew Scriptures that opened this sermon are written large. They have a myth-like quality I think so that we can find ourselves in them. Some of us have experience slavery because of the color of our skin; some of us have felt oppression for many reasons – we're too old, or don't fit the stereotype, ...including living in this society of the "haves" and "have nots"; some have felt stuck in a rut, feeding our bodies the same meal day in and day out while our souls

starve. All of us, in some way or another have longed for more freedom in our lives, more freedom in our spirits. We have yearned for a new land.

You are invited, here in this community into new experiences, to try another way of being, of living with more compassion, a generous spirit – a place where in small, covenant groups you can develop deep relationships and intimacy that feed your soul; you can belong to a group that offers service to others – for there is a healing and a spirit of restoration when we go beyond ourselves and offer help, offer ourselves and our energy to another person. You are invited into this larger community for joyful celebration and inspiration – to a vision for a more just and peace-filled world – and you are encouraged to begin living it out now – here, in this place.

There is a great song found in the section of our hymnal called Freedom – that basically sums up this whole sermon – and if I were really brave, I would have had us sing it three times and then said amen. I love this song because it speaks to a time in this country when it did not live up to its ideals and there was a people who continued to work for that promise anyway; this song tells about perseverance, it encourages our own by recalling our history. The song was written by two brothers; James Weldon Johnson wrote the words while J. Rosamond Johnson wrote the music. It was originally written for a celebration of Lincoln's birthday at Stanton School. It would later become to be known - and adopted as such by the NAACP - as the *Negro National Anthem*. Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing – it stirs my blood and reminds me of what is yet possible. (source is wikipedia and *Between the Lines*, page 41). We hold some qualities sacred and freedom is one of them. We must be willing to pay for it – with our time, with our energy. As Desmond Tutu wrote, let us bear together the responsibilities and the difficulties of

freedom. We have responsibilities as citizens in this great country – let us be about the business of getting to that work of creating this new land we seek. Let us study and learn and then act – write letters, talk to folks, make your voice heard and remember that we the people have the power. May it always be so.

Benediction – may the spirit of truth light your way at every turning and deciding place and give you courage when the choice is hard; may the strength of love uphold you when you most need it and the joy of life surprise you when you least expect it. Go this day rejoicing that you are strong enough to count the cost and work for freedom.