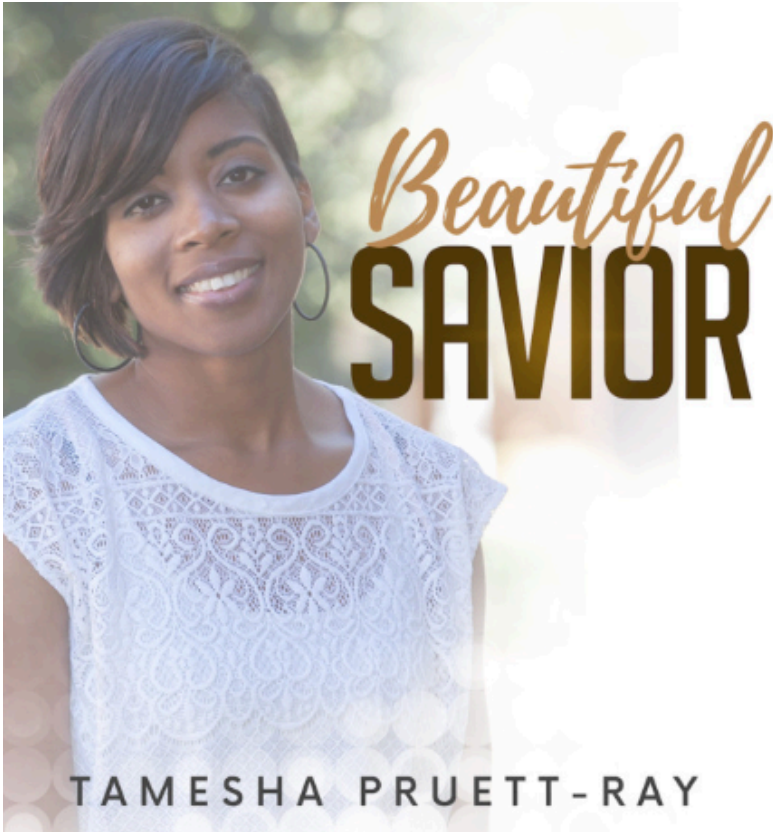


Spokane Friends Church

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“Stayed on Freedom”

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In honor of Juneteenth, and as an introduction to my message this morning, I want to try to play an MP3 file for you: [“Woke Up This Morning”](#)—these are excerpts from tracks by Tamesha Pruett Ray and Ruthie Foster.

Tamesha Pruett Ray:

**(Don't you know that) I woke up this morning with my mind
Stayed on Jesus x3**

Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu-hallelujah ... <snip>

Ruthie Foster:

<snip>

**(Let me tell you that) I'm walking and talking with my mind
Stayed on freedom x3**

Hallelu Hallelu Hallelujah

**(You know) I'm singing and praying with my mind
Stayed on freedom x3 ... <snip>**

Back when Judy and I were instructors at the New Humanities Institute in Elektrostal, Russia, we often used music as a fun way to teach listening comprehension, which was the missing element in the English classes at the Institute. I think we may have given some demonstrations of this activity during our visits to Spokane Friends in those years.

Although we usually used music and song lyrics in gapfill exercises at the end of class, there were some songs we used as part of the main lesson. For several years, we used an episode of the documentary television series *Eyes on the Prize* in our classes. You might remember that series, which was a history of the Civil Rights movement. The episode we usually used was the one entitled "Ain't Scared of Your Jails," dedicated to the downtown Nashville commercial boycott and Freedom Rides of 1960 and 1961. Our students could hear a variety of English accents and dialects, which of course suited us as teachers. Many of the activists in the documentary were the same age as our students were, which we also thought would interest them, though we had no intention of trying to turn our students into activists in Russia.

One thing that was well-covered in the documentary was the role of songs and singing in the Civil Rights movement. One of our class sessions was dedicated to the ways the Black Gospel songbooks were sources of Civil Rights anthems with just a few word changes, if any. The connection was obvious with such songs as “Just like a tree, planted by the water, I shall not be moved,” and “Don’t you let nobody turn you around.”

Our students and colleagues at the Institute knew we were Quakers, but we were careful not to say things that would even have the appearance of proselytizing. I’m a proponent of what Michael Simpson calls “permission evangelism,” which in our case meant providing opportunities where students could speak with us in our home or after class, and in those places they could ask questions about what we believed and why. So when I commented in class on the song “Woke Up This Morning” in its two versions, I simply pointed out that for Christians in the Civil Rights movement, the words “stayed on Jesus” and “stayed on freedom” meant the same thing, and they meant the same thing to me. In both versions, you’re not just waking up, walking and talking, but also singing and praying, with your mind “stayed” on the most important thing. If there’s anything you remember from this message, I hope it’s that claim I made in our classroom, that these phrases, “stayed on Jesus” and “stayed on freedom,” have this tight relationship.

Now I’m quite sure that these two phrases did not, at least not at first glance, mean the same thing to most of our students in Russia. Probably even less so, now, with most of Russia’s public Christians forced to be cheerleaders for Russia’s so-called “Special Military Operation.” But before we feel too superior, the idea of seeing freedom in Jesus, and Jesus in freedom, seems maybe counter-cultural to today’s USA as well, as young people are leaving organized religion in droves.

Interestingly, the Russian language has two words for freedom. Unlike the difference between the abstract meanings of the English words freedom and liberty, where they’re practically synonyms, the Russian words are different in an interesting way: *Svoboda* refers to freedom as a quality of life in society, a civil society that is not a dictatorship, for example. The other word, *volya*, is a more elemental, wilder

understanding of freedom, a freedom that overflows or breaks through all obstacles. Maybe something closer to anarchy, freedom without regard to consequences.

What do we understand about freedom from today's scripture?

2 Corinthians 3:4-6. Such confidence we have through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God, [who] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ...

17-18. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate [OR reflect] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Before I go any further, I should point out that this is a relatively peaceful excerpt from a letter that reflects the tensions between the author, the apostle Paul, and the Corinthian community. It's a fascinating correspondence from my point of view as a political scientist. It seems as if some people at Corinth want to know why they should take Paul seriously, so he has to assert his authority to lay down what's right and wrong, but he also has to say that he's a complete nobody on his own, a clay vessel, and his credibility rests on God's empowerment of his ministry, and the prior impressions that he has already left on his audience. It's mutual accountability. This mixture of affection and exasperation shows up in some of his other letters, maybe especially Galatians.

In the service of this balance, he talks with authority about the person who offended the community, was punished, and should now be restored. And he says, back in chapter two, that he wanted to see whether they would show that they had obeyed him in everything. So how is this freedom?

For me, Gospel freedom is described beautifully by Paul in chapter 3 verse 6, in which he claims that he is a minister of "a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit;

for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” With this new life in the Spirit, we have freedom within a covenant we have voluntarily entered: when we obey, we do so by choice, not by compulsion nor from fear.

Take an example from Quaker history. Back in 1656, the Quaker elders at Balby in Yorkshire, England, sent a general epistle to Quakers in the north. This letter is a sort of miniature book of Christian discipline, before there were any formal books of Faith and Practice, such as what our Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting is in the process of composing now. The elders divided their advice into twenty points, covering the regular holding of public meetings for worship, for speaking faithfully at such meetings, what to do when someone is guilty of what they call “disorderly walking,” and how they are to be tenderly reprimanded, and so on. Also, advice concerning marriages, recording of births, care for the poor, keeping their promises in trade and business, paying off debts, and so on.

Here’s one I like, No. 17:

That none be busy bodies in others' matters, but each one to bear another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ; that they be sincere and without offence, and that all things that are honest, be done without murmuring, and disputing, that you may be blameless and harmless, ... without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, amongst whom they may shine as lights in the world.

Now, following no. 20, the last point in the epistle, here’s the part you may already be familiar with, because this postscript to the epistle from the elders at Balby has been widely circulated among Friends for over three and a half centuries:

20.- That the younger submit themselves to the elder, - yea all be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility; for God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.

Given forth at a general meeting of friends in truth at Balby in Yorkshire in the ninth month 1656

Dearly beloved Friends, these things we do not lay upon you as a rule or form to walk by; but that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding, these things may be fulfilled in the Spirit, not in the letter, for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life.

So we get to the actual anchor point of this freedom: “that all, with a measure of the light, which is pure and holy, may be guided: and so in the light walking and abiding.” We know from experience how this is likely to look most of the time, and therefore we can make bold to proclaim some limitations on the absolute elemental freedom that some yearn for hungrily and others shrink from. It’s a place where we test our choices and our motivations, before we might end up giving free rein to our addictions and resentments under the guise of freedom.

Some of you know I have a complicated relationship with obedience. My mother grew up in a German household in Japan during the Nazi years. So she had an abundance of authorities over her: not just Adolf Hitler, head of the nation her parents had come from, and of the Nazi party her father belonged to. but also, the emperor of the country she was being raised in was regarded as divine. It’s really no wonder that our parents seemed at times to rule us with iron fists. The reality was that, in real life, they alternated wildly between total, strict control with swift punishment, and periods of neglect when we could take the loose change that my sister and I had gradually filched from them, and while one of us made distracting noises, the other could slip out to the corner drugstore and buy a load of candy bars, which we’d haul up to our second-floor window with a basket on a rope. There was not much morality in our attitudes. Freedom consisted of what we could get away with when they weren’t looking. My stealing and shoplifting days came to an end when, long before I turned to Jesus, I began thinking that God might actually exist, and therefore my operating principle—namely, what can you get away with when nobody’s looking—wasn’t safe anymore. Surely God was looking.

I got out of that family cult of obedience when my parents evicted me from our home shortly before my high school graduation, but at that point my constant worry was having a place to stay and enough to eat, and then to accumulate enough money for college, which in my case turned out to be a provincial university in Canada with a good interdisciplinary Russian studies program, with kind relatives nearby. My choices in those years were important, but they were very pragmatic. Eventually, no doubt influenced by my Canadian relatives' prayers, I made another choice: to break my family's anti-church taboos, and peek into the apparently least-organized corner of organized religion: the local Friends meeting. That's where I began to taste a far more delicious form of freedom. The first place I experienced that freedom was in my very first Quaker meeting for worship. In Ottawa, this baptism into Gospel freedom took the form of an hour of silence, in which nobody told me what to think or not think, or who was superior and who was inferior, or who was my potential friend and who was my enemy. The elders in that Quaker community, especially those on my clearness committee for membership, were more concerned to discern whether I was making an informed choice when applying to be a Friend, rather than whether I was good enough to join them. It was a wonderful experience of making a choice for freedom by voluntarily entering a covenant of grace, where I might be held accountable, but it was a balance: I was also expected to hold the community accountable for its promises to me.

Fast forward fifty years. Now I'm on a committee that has something of the same task as the elders at Balby, that is, the Faith and Practice Committee of Sierra-Cascades Yearly Meeting, and in an arguably similar time of confusion and disillusionment over faith and facts in the wider American society. Our yearly meeting was divided off from a strongly Christian Quaker body, Northwest Yearly Meeting, and so we have people who were wounded and disillusioned by that body, and some have a complicated relationship with their inherited Christian faith. Others are uncomplicatedly enthusiastic about their relationship with Jesus, and so you can see that, without hard work at building trust, fear and caution and resentment, too much sensitivity on the one hand, and not enough on the other, could nibble away at the freedom we ought to have in our baby yearly meeting.

At our annual sessions earlier this month, we adopted our own version of the Balby epistle as part of the preamble to the Faith and Practice book that we're assembling. After we establish that we're centered in Christ, inclusive and affirming, and guided by Quaker testimonies and experience, we go on to say what we mean by those testimonies. Here's how we put it:

We understand the Quaker testimonies as a call:

- **to live simply and sustainably;**
- **to seek nonviolent responses to conflict, and refuse participation in war and preparation for war;**
- **to speak the truth and keep our promises;**
- **to make common decisions based on our community's practice of prayer and discernment rather than majority rule or force of personality;**
- **to regard each other—and all people—with a commitment to equality and equity, rejecting all false distinctions based on social, cultural, or economic status;**
- **in the wider world, to support, advocate, and initiate efforts toward peace, justice, care of Creation, and relief of suffering in ways that are consistent with these testimonies;**
- **in all things, to put Love first.**

As we set forth these values and commitments, we acknowledge that they are to some extent aspirational, not an inventory of our successes as of today.

We also understand that we have a variety of faith languages and experiences among us. We do not require of each other, or of newcomers, any standard interpretation or test to be part of our community. We are committed to listening and learning together, building trust in God and each other through the ways that we worship, conduct business, guard each other's reputations, and resolve conflicts tenderly.

Anyone who feels drawn to our community based on these values and testimonies, and the ways we live them, will be joyfully welcomed.

For this time and place, we hope and pray that we meet the Biblical standard Paul set out: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God, [who] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”