

Baccalaureate 2015
May 22, 2015
© Virginia Wiles

For Freedom

Anger, David Whyte says, is the purest form of care.

A reading from Galatians:

2:1-5 – Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. I went up by revelation; and I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain. But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. But because of false brethren because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage—to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

4:12-19 – Brothers and Sisters, I beseech you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. ... Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. ... My little children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!

So. Here we are.

Thank you for the honor of asking me to speak this evening.

Makes me a bit nervous. Maybe a little.

But I once heard someone say, “The only way to get this wrong, is not to do it.”

[deep breath]

So. You are here. At the end of this particular leg of your journey.

Congratulations. Great good fun and oh, my, the hard work! Sleep well, now.

You have won for yourself an education.

It’s been said that the purpose of an education is “for freedom.”

So the question is:

Are you free?

Are you freer today than you were when you started this journey?

Has your voice grown stronger? truer? less sophisticated and more accessible? more confident?

Do you know your own mind? And can you speak with your own voice?

Like the three Hebrew children, who spoke in their own voices to the great imperial power:

We will not bow down!

It was my favorite Bible story when I was a child.

I loved the details – if you haven’t looked at this in the King James Version recently go back and look at it. Beautiful, scrumptious details ...

I loved the courage of these children. Their strength. We will not bow down!

I loved that fourth man in the fiery furnace. The mystery of it! –

Mystery!

A hero story.

A fairy tale ... for it all comes out alright in the end, doesn’t it? The three boys are raised to positions of power in the kingdom. A Win!

I loved this story as a hero story, as a story of how God prevails and the good will win.

[with attitude!]: We will not bow down!

And then I grew up. And ran headlong into the reality of this world. I heard others tell this tale. I learned that it’s not ... – well, it’s a different kind of hero story than my childhood self had imagined.

King called the story about the 3 boys, about their faith—he called it a “though” faith. And the “though” faith says, “Though things go wrong; though evil is temporarily triumphant; though sickness comes and the cross looms, **nevertheless!**”

It’s not just that the boys said, “We will not bow down,” and the story isn’t about the political win these young men received at the end of the story—indeed, that part of the story almost, well it comes close to curdling the real cream of this tale—the story’s heart lies here—in the three words, “But if not” (which is the title of King’s famous sermon). They were confident that God would deliver them, but if not, they said, “We. will. not. bow. down.” Period.

Folks, that’s what freedom looks like. Freedom requires a “though” faith, a “but if not” faith.

So again, I will ask you. Sitting here, enrobed, awaiting the handshake and the diploma – Are you free? Has any of this helped? Has your voice been strengthened so that you can say, “We will not bow down even if not ...”?

I fear, sometimes, that the story—our story together—is otherwise... for,

Education puffs us up
with fancy words & big ideas

What's my grade? and
Am I worth it? and
worst of all,
Do you approve?

[how many pages? single-space or double? when is it due?]

Tell me what you want, O Teacher.
Shape a rubric for my measure.
Make me good as,
smart as,
robed as you are.

I worry ...

I worry ...

that sometimes we imprison you rather than free you.

I worry that you may have found our voice ... and not your own.

That maybe it sometimes becomes more about being legitimate, measuring up, proving yourselves.

Here's the problem with that "being legitimate" thing.

If you want to "be legitimate"

if you're trying to outsmart the "fraud police"

if you're trying to prove that you can be—are!—as good as anyone else –

you're living in a kind of prison.

You've handed the keys to your life (the keys of your calling) to others, to those who

"legitimate" you, to those who give you the grade, to those who say "we approve" to those who set the standards and hand out the robes...

And if you're in that kind of prison, if you've given the keys to your life and your heart away ...

you will never be free enough to stand and say, "We will not bow down."

Here's the oops to the ugh, folks –

At its worst, those who hold the keys will massage your need for approval and use you for their own purposes, to achieve their own ends.

Like Iago with Othello.

Do you know the story?

Read it sometime. Watch one of the film adaptations—I like the Laurence Fishburne production, but pick any one you like. Attend to Shakespeare’s awful wisdom.

Here’s the core question of that play:

What leads someone to kill their dearest love? To *murder* their greatest joy?

For Othello, that was Desdemona: **“O, my soul’s joy!”** he exclaimed of her.

And Iago—perhaps the most perfectly portrayed villain, the most villainous villain, in all of world literature, he who was called “honest friend” by everyone in the play—Iago tickles Othello’s desire for legitimacy. That is Iago’s evil deed.

It was subtle – he came as “honest friend” – Iago did not say,

“You’re a black man, Othello,
in a white, white world.”

He did not say explicitly: “Don’t act like a black man, Othello.”

What he said was: “think of your reputation!”

**Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
is the immediate jewel of their souls.**

Do you measure up, Othello?

You must maintain [our] high standards ... of duty and of justice and of honor! Enough to kill Desdemona, your soul’s joy.

Are you legitimate now? Legitimized?

Well, wonderful James Baldwin said it better (Really folks, if you haven’t read “Sonny’s Blues” recently, please do so. Read it again and at least once a year. It’s an essential in this life we live on this earth.) Baldwin, talking about this “legitimizing stuff” said, being born black, into a white world ...

If you’re born into that situation ... You’ve been taught that you’re inferior so you act as though you’re inferior. And on the level that is very difficult to get at, you really believe it. [I’m inferior.] And, of course, all the things you do to prove you’re not inferior only really prove you are. They boomerang ... You’re playing the game according to somebody else’s rules, and you can’t win until you understand the rules and step out of that particular game, which is not, after all worth playing.”

Baldwin was talking, I think—having grown up in his own church way, and surely hearing often about those three Hebrew children—Baldwin might as well say that the 3 Hebrew children would not have chosen to play the King’s game ... even after delivery from the fire ... I think Baldwin would re-write that story and when the King raises the 3 young men into political leadership in the royal empire, the boys would turn to him and say, “No, no no. We will not bow down! ... Thank you very muchly, sir, but we will not bow down – nor accept your false honors.”

And so now I want to ask you, O wonderful graduates who have struggled and won and surpassed and ... so on,
Will you choose to play by somebody else’s rules ... or will you say, “We will not bow down!”
Are you free?

For Freedom, Christ has set you free.
And Paul was angry. Seriously, he was.
(Remember, please, just a tidbit here—niceness is often the face of apathy and even cruelty.
Honor your angers. They are, as David Whyte says, the purest form of care!)

Paul says ... he went up to Jerusalem “to those who were of repute,”
but there was controversy ... “because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage—”

THIS is something the story about the 3 boys didn’t talk about. This sneaky-snooper thing—false friends slip in to spy out our freedom! – It’s Iago all over again, folks—but Paul says,

to them we did not yield submission even for a moment.

He, too, must have grown up hearing that same story of the 3 boys in the fiery furnace.

We will not bow down.

We will not yield submission even for a moment.

He knew well, as he says a little later in this letter to the Galatians –

They make much of you – but for no good purpose. [Yikes!]

Are you ready for it: We are so proud to have you, they will say, you’re the first person of color to serve as pastor of this church! We’ve made this position special for you, because you are so special (unique, you know, for your type of people). We are so proud of you, you preach wonderful ... for a girl. You have a calling—please come and make us diverse. God has blessed you with a faithful and obedient voice, will you lead our women’s ministry? And

so we are thereby appointed unto leadership—on behalf of *their* dreams and objectives and strategic plans and mission.

But Paul says ...

They want to shut you out, that you may make much of them.

And Baldwin says: These things boomerang.

And folks – they always do ... these things boomerang.

And so at last, far into his letter (not at the beginning!) Paul gives us his thesis statement:

For freedom, Christ has set us free!

For freedom

I'm winding up, here, never fear. But lest the point is not named sufficiently let me be clear.

We're talking about internalized oppression. Internalized racial oppression. Internalized gender oppression. Internalized class oppression. It's a curse of this world we live in. That we learn to maintain the external oppression—and serve the powers that be—even after the physical, external chains have fallen off, or apparently so. The powers don't need to maintain it—can even claim they're anti-racist and non-sexist. They don't need to maintain the oppression, because we will do it for them. We train ourselves to seek their approval—white or male or academia or the profession or the presbytery or the critics... or whatever!—and seeing that approval, wanting to “measure up” – always boomerangs!

Be innocent as doves—but never fail to be as wise as serpents.

This requires a daily, diligent practice:

- prayer is necessary
- a mentor who has forged the way of freedom for herself, for himself, this is necessary, essential!
- friends who are also working toward freedom from internalized oppression, friends who “get it” and know how hard it is (oh my, not friends who console with easy words and encouragement to “just play the game”)
- nurturing together a serpent-wisdom that is hand-in-hand with a dove's innocence
- a clarity of vision: It's for freedom that Christ has set us free!

The only way to fail at this is not to do it, folks.

and if we do not do this, God help us, God forgive us ... for we may, almost certainly will, fall into that most lamentable position of playing the game and teasing and tickling the internalized oppression of those we're charged to serve, using them for our own purposes, making them our disciples, measuring them by our superior standards, helping them to become "good as, smart as, robed as we are." [But of course, never *quite* as smart as we are. That's the trap, huh.] Lest we become Iago. "Honest friend, destroying life"

So Tomorrow: Raise your diploma (the fake diploma you will get – you gotta pay your bills, folks!) Raise that diploma high, wave it in the air wildly and know that you have all the success you ever need. Don't let them use you. They cannot give you anything.

Claim your freedom. Free the people

We will not bow down!

Let's practice it right now! Say it with me: We will not bow down!

Now for a brief palate cleanser before I go, back into my cubby hole of darkness. I'll mimic Paul and say, "grant me a little foolishness, do bear with me"

Imagine for just this moment that your heart's desire, that hidden nugget, that thing that you do and are and is all you – where really & truly the only way to get it wrong is not to do it – that YOU that God has made to be you.

Imagine *that* as a ... ukulele –

So I leave you with this blessing of freedom – a chorus from a song, indeed, an anthem!
(appropriately)

So play your favorite cover song, especially if the words are wrong!
'Cause even if your grades are bad, it doesn't mean you're failing
Do your homework with a fork!
And eat your Froot Loops in the dark!
And bring your Etch-A-Sketch to work!
And play your ukulele!

Ukulele small and fierceful!
Ukulele brave and peaceful!
You can play the ukulele too, it is painfully simple!
Play your ukulele badly, play your ukulele loudly!
Ukulele banish evil!
Ukulele save the people!
Ukulele gleaming golden from the top of every steeple!

Folks, go forth where only you can go and play your ukulele!
'Cause the only way to get this wrong ... is not to do it.
Amen.



"For Freedom" by Virginia Wiles is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Sources for all citations may be found at <http://ukulelesteeple.com/for-freedom/>