

**Made for Greatness
First Presbyterian
Grand Junction, CO**

So glad to get to be here on Freedom Sunday. We are celebrating this Freedom Sunday with over 5,000 churches around the world—all committing themselves to take their part in bringing an end to slavery for good!

And I'm so thankful to get to be here with you at First Pres. Grand Junction. We are so grateful for your connection with IJM's over last several years.

Feels a bit like family... So much so that I actually want to begin by telling you something that I don't usually tell people about myself. It wasn't in that kind introduction that Tom gave, but it has bearing on where I want to head this morning.

Confession – don't be distracted by this – I used to play for the New England Patriots.

I'm not going to apologize... I came buy it honestly.

- Grew up about 10 miles from Foxboro stadium
- Athletic as a kid, loved all kinds of sports
- Not introduced to contact sports until junior high--Lacrosse
- Scrimmage... Contact! ... Music Program
- Patriots so bad, and High School Band so good, that My HS was pep band for Patriots
- I was on the field many Sundays. Right on the 50 yard line – at halftime – playing the sousaphone.
- Watched lots of games from the sidelines... Some pro games, but mostly high school games
- Began wondering... What if I was built for something more than just sitting on the sidelines??? **What if I, myself, had actually been made for greatness!**

About the same time I was being introduced to Christianity (though a friend in my high school band, of course).

- Seemed somehow “right” to me, so I said yes. I committed my life to following Jesus.
- What that seemed to mean was that I would show up at church on Sunday mornings, nice people would usher me into a pew. Sit through service. On the way out they'd welcome me back for... Sunday night service... and Wednesday night service (Baptist church).
- People seemed very interested in and capable of helping me understand what I should *not* be doing anymore.
- BUT...
- It was very difficult to find anyone who could tell me what else *to* do...

Now, on some level, that makes sense to me. There were bad habits, behaviors... sin, in my life that needed to be dealt with. (There still is.) That is right and appropriate.

But I also had a sense that there ought to be something more... **some compelling call to greatness**, some challenging, epic mission “out there” that we were preparing for! This feeling became more and more pronounced as I got to know the person of Jesus.

Because when Jesus came to earth, he came clearly stating his purpose. He said he’d been given all authority in Heaven and on earth to establish, once and for eternity, the Kingdom of God. And when he described the nature of his mission and the nature of that Kingdom, he used epic language. I’ll get to the lectionary passages for this morning in a few minutes. But first, let me set some context. Listen to what Jesus says as he walks into the synagogue in Nazareth and reads from the scroll of Isaiah—its recorded for us in Luke 4:18-19

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. Luke 4:18-19

- Bring good news to the poor...
- Proclaim release to the captives...
- Recovery of sight to the blind...
- Let the oppressed go free...

This is a huge, world-transforming, great mission. And it struck me that you can’t do any of these things by just by sitting in a church pew—as important as this is!

Then there’s this conversation that Jesus has with Peter in Matthew 16:18...

Jesus looks at Peter and says:

I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

The gates of *hell* will not prevail against it.
The *gates* of hell will not prevail against it.

This is a picture of the church on the *offence*! The very gates of hell are unable to withstand the inexorable advance of the church.

It’s a good thing too because in this fallen world there is plenty that can go horribly wrong. James refers to this in this morning’s reading. Just to pull one verse out from the middle of that reading

For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.

Gates of hell? Disorder and wickedness? The question presents itself on a beautiful Sunday morning on the Western Slope... Is this just hyperbole? Are Jesus and James just exaggerating to make a point?

Well, you heard Pastor Tom’s introduction of IJM, and you saw the story of our IJM client Foli. For those of you who are less aware of IJM, we are the world’s largest anti-slavery organization. We are Christian lawyers, investigators, social workers, and army other professionals a thousand strong working all over the world to intervene in cases of violence against the world’s poor.

What this means is that at IJM we are in daily contact with disorder and wickedness. And my colleagues will tell you they have been present to watch the church come right up against the very gates of hell.

What does that look like? Well, it looks like real places like Svay Pak, Cambodia

For many children, Svay Pak is squarely inside the gates of hell.

- It's just a small village 11km outside of Phnom Penh.
- Essentially it is a collection of wooden houses and huts.
- You can't tell from the picture, but Svay Pak is overrun by pimps and human traffickers who pressure families into selling their children into the dozens of brothels that line the streets of the village.
- Mien's family is destitute, her father a violent, jobless alcoholic.
- Just to put food on the table her mother regularly borrows money from local loan sharks on unmanageable terms.
- Their financial situation is not a secret, and as pressure mounts, multiple pimps and brothel owners begin pressuring Mien's mother to sell her into a brothel to ensure the family's survival.
- At first Mien's mother resists, but finally she succumbs to the pressure. And at age 13, Mien's virginity is put on auction at a local brothel about a block from her home.
- On the Cambodian market an underage girl's virginity can be sold to wealthy foreigners for anywhere from \$500 to \$5,000. So, because of her "value" to the brothel owner, Mien and other young virgin girls are locked in a pink room of the brothel called the "virgin room" to prevent them from running away.
- Once a man is found willing to pay a high enough premium, Mien is raped for the first time. She's then allowed to return home but required to report back to the brothel on a moment's notice—whenever a customer calls for her.
- From that first day forward, she will be called back to the brothel an average of three times—every day.

This, I submit, is an accurate description of hell on earth. And we know Mien is not alone. In fact, way back in 2002 the International Labor Organization was reporting that Human trafficking involves **1.2 million children each year**.

And here's what it looks like for **Raman and his family**

- Raman is actually a third generation slave. Both his father and grandfather were also slaves.
- Raman was forced to drop out of school in 4th grade to start working at a rice mill.
- And pretty much since he can remember, he's been working 18 hour days, boiling, raking, drying, and bagging ton after ton of rice.
- This can be hard to picture, so I'm rolling this undercover video footage...
- Raman's family was lured into this form of slavery by a small loan. They were told that if they came and worked in the mill, they could pay off the debt, then they could leave.

- But they were never allowed to leave. In fact, the rice mill owner has been paying them pennies, and charging Raman exorbitant interest so that the debt actually *increases* the longer they work.
- And if Raman or any of his fellow slaves try to leave, the owner openly uses threats and physical abuse to keep them there.

Now this sort of violence is, of course, *illegal*. At IJM, we know of nowhere in the world where it is actually legal to own and exploit another human being in these ways. **But here's the thing: *Laws do not stop the violence. In fact it turns out that good laws are simply useless without good law enforcement.***

And so, sex trafficking and labor trafficking persist. In fact, it is an epidemic on a scale that is frankly, quite difficult to fathom:

- 45 Million Slaves (Global Slavery Index) More than at any other time in human history
- Human Trafficking nets \$150 Billion dollars per year for these criminals. That's more than the top six US corporations in any given year—*combined*.

In fact, in Raman's country alone, it's estimated that there are between 10 and 15 million children, women, and men held illegally in slavery. My colleagues and I have met thousands of them.

And finally, here's what here's what disorder and wickedness look like for **David**.

- Everyone just loves David. He is a young man living just outside Nairobi Kenya.
- He brings kids to church on Sunday, He volunteers at a local AIDS clinic.
- But one day while David was walking home from his job at the video store and he ran into some policemen. These policemen had been drinking at a local café ran out of beer money. So they got into their cruiser and went down the street grabbing young men and dragging them into the car. They threatened them saying give us all your money or we'll charge you with a crime and put you in jail. They grabbed David who knew he didn't want to go to a Nairobi Jail so he gave them all he had - about \$1.50 in Kenyan shillings.
- When the police car stopped David was told he could go. As David walked away from the car, one of the policemen pulled out his revolver and shot David twice; once in the right arm and once in the side. David collapsed into a pool of his own blood. But the police didn't care about him. They just drove off.
- In great pain David somehow managed to get up and, soaked in his own blood, he made his way across the street where fortunately there was a small medical clinic. David was able to receive treatment for his wounds. The bone in his right arm was so badly shattered by the bullet that it had to be amputated just below the elbow.
- When the police discovered that David had survived and was receiving treatment, they came to the clinic and charged him with a crime – robbery with violence.
- There are two things you need to know about the crime of robbery with violence in Kenya; first, it is not bailable; and second, it carries a mandatory death sentence.
- So, as soon as he's well enough, David is carried off to a Nairobi jail to await a trial for his life.

Okay, these can be difficult stories. They can be disorienting. Let's take a deep breath and see if we can't re-orient ourselves.

The first question we might ask is, "How does God feel about all this?" And it turns out from the scriptures, this is actually quite clear. Let me list just a few examples:

Psalm 35:10 (David)

All my bones shall say, 'O Lord, who is like you? You deliver the weak from those too strong for them, the weak and needy from those who despoil them.'

So if the stories of Mien, Raman, and David have made you *angry* this morning? That's actually because God has put into you a piece of his heart and passion for this issue. This is you reflecting this deep aspect of your Father's character.

In fact, God has created and called us not just to feel bad, or to feel angry about injustice, but actually to respond!

Isaiah 1:17

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

For those of us who take the Word of God seriously, there can be no mistake. The issue of biblical justice is all over our scriptures. So it should be no surprise when we get to the New Testament that Jesus is also concerned about these things. These passages from Psalm 35, Isaiah, Micah—these are all passages from the scriptures that Jesus himself read!

So it shouldn't surprise us when we get to this morning's lectionary passage from Mark 9, we get this fascinating interaction between Jesus and his disciples. I love this:

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.'

I love how Jesus draws the disciples out here: "What were you talking about on the way?"

"Um... Nothing..." You see, they are embarrassed. Because, like me, they'd begun to wonder if they haven't been made for greatness in some way.

But then Jesus calls them out and they don't want to answer because they are ashamed—they are expecting a punishment, a rebuke from Jesus. But gloriously, Jesus doesn't *rebuke* them for wanting to be great. He actually *tells them how!*

"You want to be great? Become the servant of all."

If we imagine the people of the world waiting in line to be served, it's hard to imagine that David, Mien, and Raman, these victims of injustice would have too many people behind them in line. Who in God's name is going to serve them?

For the last 20 years at International Justice Mission we've been pondering hard just what would look like to serve people like David and Mien, and Raman—and to serve them at their point of need. Because clearly at the moment, their primary need is not for a sermon, or a meal, or shelter, or even medical care. What they need is for someone to make the abuse stop!

And so this is precisely what IJM has sought to do for the last 20 years. And we've done it precisely because it seems clear from the Scriptures that God's church is intended to seek out and to serve the very last, the most vulnerable, the most hopeless.

So when my colleagues heard about the situation in Svay Pak, naturally they began to investigate what might be done about it. Because of this, Mien knows what it looks like to see the church come crashing through the gates of hell. She watched it happen.

- Way back in 2003, just a few months after Mien was sold into the brothel, IJM conducted a large operation in the village of Svay Pak (this was depicted on the TV news program Dateline).
- But sadly, because of the many lies the brothel keeper told her, Mien was very frightened when she saw the combined IJM/Police operation happening. She hid in the bushes.
- Mien watched as 37 other girls aged 5-17 were rescued that day. But she was left behind.
- When the brothel was shut down, Mien's family migrated to a town in the north called Siem Reap – where Mien was simply sold into another brothel with seemingly no end in sight.
- Miraculously however, *three years later*, at the request of the Siem Reap police, an IJM undercover investigator entered a local brothel looking for minors and among 20 other girls, the investigator discovered Mien looking destitute and sad.
- In January of 2007, IJM and the Siem Reap police conducted an operation in this brothel.
- Mien was rescued and began a healing process.
- In aftercare, Mien learned to sew, and she started her own tailoring business.
- After significant care and trauma therapy, Mien was actually able to testify against those who had perpetrated these crimes against her. Because she was able to tell the truth about what had been done to her, **all four perpetrators were convicted and sent to prison.**

I'm also thrilled to tell you that Raman and his family are no longer toiling away, enslaved in a rice mill.

- IJM's team in Chennai was able to carefully document the illicit abuse in the rice mill where Raman was enslaved
- The team then presented the evidence to local officials who were compelled to act by law.

- And so, in an IJM-assisted operation, Raman and 34 other children, women and men were rescued and granted official release certificates (by the Indian government) cancelling their inflated debts
- This document was effectively Raman's own emancipation proclamation, and the beginning of his family's resettlement back into their native village.
- I'm happy to report that Raman and his family are *thriving!*
- Raman is working a construction job, his kids are in school
- Raman also was enrolled in IJM's community leadership training
- And today he's leading 70 other families in his village in petitioning the Indian Government to provide running water and electricity.

It took nine years and two separate trials, but eventually the brutal rice-mill owner was convicted in a landmark trial. One of the statutes used to convict him dated all the way back to the 1860's. He was actually tried and convicted for "habitually dealing in slaves." He was sentenced to 5 years of hard labor.

I'm also glad to tell you the David is no longer languishing in a Kenyan prison. When my colleagues heard of David's situation, they sprang into action. IJM lawyers came to David's defense and were able to prove that the charges against him were completely false—and they were able to bring the police officers who did this to David up on charges! So David is no longer in prison. In fact, David himself has graduated law school and was recently admitted to the bar of the High Court of Kenya.

David has discovered that he was made for greatness. He is now using the very best of what he has to offer to in service of the most vulnerable of his country.

So, what's the invitation for all of us this morning?

Let's heed Jesus' call together. Let's take another step toward greatness. Let's figure out how we too can follow Jesus' command to become the servants of all.

Over the last 20 years, we at IJM have simply marveled at the way the church has rallied to this fight—at the sheer number of faithful people who have jumped off the sidelines and run toward the greatness Jesus commands.

There is so much you can do! You can join the Justice League here at First Pres. They are already deeply engaged with IJM.

I also want you to specifically consider becoming what we a "Freedom Partner." Freedom Partners pursue greatness by praying earnestly and regularly for the end of slavery, advocating for justice in specific and targeted ways, and investing in rescue and restoration for survivors, and restraint and accountability for perpetrators.

You may not realize this sitting here this morning in beautiful Grand Junction, but you can change the game. Right now all the power is on the side of the oppressor—those who seek to exploit rather than to serve the vulnerable. The oppressors are using all their power, creative influence, and resources to entrap victims and enslave them for predatory loans as low as \$25.

This morning, I want to invite you to change the equation—to put your power, your advocacy, and just \$25 on the side of the oppressed.

Some of you have done this already, you've become Freedom Partners. For those who haven't had the opportunity yet, Pastor Tom has made it easy for you. On your pew you'll find a freedom partner form. ***Can you take a minute to find it and take it out?***

Please take a minute to consider if you might be able to do this: for as little as \$24 (or more if you like), you can show up for Families like Raman's, or for children like Mien, or young men like David. **Just take the 30 seconds to fill out the card, then drop it in the offering basket on the way out—or at the IJM table.** That's it! Game=Changed. It's that easy. In fact if you give in the month of September, your gift will be doubled for the whole first year up to \$798,000. **(One important thing to note, this is not a mailer envelope. You'll need to turn this in today.)**

I know this material is heavy, especially if some of these things are new to you. So I want to give you a minute or two in quiet to consider what God might be saying to you in all this. Over the years we've found that listening to God for a response you can make is one of the best ways to keep from being overwhelmed by it. Is God calling you to pray? To give? To help others understand the need? Because the important thing is not to miss out on the invitation.

Please take a minute to prayerfully consider your response. If you prefer, you can also do this online via smartphone.

Pause. Music playing in the background.

And let me end with one final story.

- Last fall, my youngest, my son started college—and wouldn't you know it, he's a music major and he's in the marching band (proud dad).
- So, again, I'm finding myself at a lot of football games.
- You know, I still feel the twinge, that feeling of wondering, what if I was actually made for greatness?
- But you know, more importantly than that. Someday I hope that I'll sit before a tribunal of my grandchildren. And one of the things I expect they'll ask is, "Grandpa, where were you?"
 - Where were you when this massive epidemic of violence was devastating the world's poor?
 - when there were more slaves than any other time in recorded history?
 - Where were you when children were being trafficked into red light districts?

I want to be able to answer that I was not on the sidelines, that along with a group of courageous Freedom Partners, I was pursuing Jesus' vision of greatness. I was using the best of what I had, the best of who I was to serve the least and the last in the very name of Jesus.

Please pray with me...