

Sermon: The Measure of a Man

By Andi Fox

Scripture—Gal 3:26-29

You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. Now if you belong to Christ, then indeed you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.

We are continuing our spring study *Trekking Through the Bible*. We watched the episode “The Measure of a Man” from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. So, in our new tradition, Captain’s Log star date 42523.7, The Enterprise-D has stopped at a star base for routine maintenance. A cybernetic scientist named Bruce Maddox wants to take apart the Enterprise’s second officer, the android Data, to try and make more androids like him. Data doesn’t want to be taken apart. He decides to resign from StarFleet rather than let Maddox experiment on him. Maddox claims that Data is the property of StarFleet and can’t resign. So the star base’s Judge Advocate General office holds a hearing. Captain Picard defends Data while the first officer Commander Riker has to support Maddox even though he doesn’t want to. They argue essentially whether or not Data is a person. Does this android have all the same rights as a human or Vulcan or Klingon Starfleet officer or is he property? Commander Riker makes a strong argument that Data is just a machine, including dramatically turning Data off.

It is the ship’s bartender Guinan who helps Captain Picard see the ugly truth underneath the easy word “property.” Many androids would be incredibly valuable and disposable. If Data is found to be property, the androids who come after him would be slaves. This idea infuriates Picard who goes back into the courtroom and has a great monologue. Picard says that how the judge rules on Data “... will reveal the kind of people we are.... It could significantly redefine the boundaries of personal liberty and freedom: expanding them for some, savagely curtailing them for others. Are you prepared to condemn [Commander Data] – and all who will come after him – to servitude and slavery?” The judge rules that Data is not property and reflects on the fact that this is an argument that belongs to “saints and philosophers.” What are we gathered here if not saints and philosophers? So let’s think about freedom and slavery.

It’s easy for us to gloss over the term “slave” or “slavery” in the Bible thinking that slavery in American history is different than ancient slavery. While the passage over the Atlantic may have been unique to American slavery, the type of slavery itself wasn’t. Slavery at any time means a removal of personal and communal autonomy, subjugation to the will of another. Paul talks about being a slave to Christ. Mary says that she is God’s slave when Gabriel comes to tell her that she’s going to be the mother of the Messiah. In *Philippians* it even says that Christ took the form of a slave. This is a subversion of what a slave is. Choosing to remove your own will and instead try to make God’s will your own is still a choice. I think that’s one of the reasons so

often the Greek word is translated as “servant.” Servant has a different quality to it than the word “slave.” Servants often choose whom they serve, even if their choices are limited because of geography or other things. Slaves do not choose.

Starfleet is not a Christian organization, but it was created around equality for all. As we saw in the first episode of our spring study, “The Apple,” choice and freedom are greatly appreciated by Starfleet potentially even to the detriment of other species. Once the term “slave” came into the conversation in our Next Generation episode, anyone who knows Starfleet knew there was no way a Starfleet officer would ever rule for a species to be categorized as slaves. A species kept in slavery, or in this case created for slavery, goes against its very founding philosophies. Can we say the same about Christianity?

When we look at the history of our religion, we don’t find a unified answer on the subject of slavery. Christians both justified and condemned slavery on the basis of their religion. But I can’t stand before you and make the argument that the Bible or Christianity defends slavery even in theory because I find slavery of any kind morally reprehensible and completely against the loving, living God I have come to know in my life. There’s a lot in the Bible about slavery, and we don’t have time to go through it all. I’ve been promised there’s ‘something like cupcakes’ waiting for us. So I’d like to quote New Testament scholar Dr. Mitzi Smith who wrote, “We cannot replicate the Bible where it fails to give testimony to the freedom, love, justice and peace of God.” “We cannot replicate the Bible where it fails to give testimony to the freedom, love, justice and peace of God.”

Our text today says, “There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Yet we know that these are the types of things that matter greatly to our lives. We read the Bible through the lens of all these things that are so important to our humanity. I can’t separate the fact that I read the Bible differently than Pastor Michael because we have different lived experiences. Even though we are close in age, we are not the same generation. We are both white but have different gendered experiences. All of that and much more influences how we read the Bible and how we experience God.

The Bible can be a dangerous influence if read in light of the “testimony to the freedom, love, justice, and peace of God” as Dr. Smith wrote. Why else would Southern slaveowners have made sure that slaves couldn’t read so they specifically couldn’t read the Bible for themselves? What is so dangerous about the freedom, love, justice, and peace of God? What is so dangerous about proclaiming there is no slave or free person, no female or male, no Jew or Gentile because we are all one in Christ? It’s dangerous because it shifts the power dynamic.

The choice to follow Christ is the choice to say to the powers of the world that I’m not going to follow you. Those in power don’t like that. Just look at Bruce Maddox, supposedly the person with power in the Star Trek episode, who freaked out when Data said ‘no, I’m not going to let you experiment on me.’ Throughout the episode Maddox denies the personhood of Data, particularly by using the pronoun “it” instead of “him” until the very end of the episode after the judge has ruled in Data’s favor. Maddox has been faced with the personhood of someone he considered not a person, and it changes the way he looks at Data, talks about Data, and interacts

with Data. Challenging those in power is hard enough as free people. Imagine challenging those in power as slaves.

As free people, we are able to make choices. As Captain Picard said, our choices can 'savagely curtail' freedoms for other people. With the freedom we find in Christ, we can be a part of God's righteous actions in the world. Again quoting New Testament professor Dr. Mitzi Smith, "We have a choice to do evil or to do justice. Whatever we decide, it is our choice; we cannot blame our moral choices on the oppression and oppressive depictions of God in the Bible. The God whom we relish to show up for us as individuals in [manifestations] of mercy, love, justice, grace, freedom, and provisions should be the God we embody in [our community] and in the world." Amen.