

Long, long ago, I remember wanting to have a tiger for a pet. O, people told me that they cannot be tamed, but I could still dream. A tiger with razor sharp teeth and claws, it's body all muscle and power, quick, agile, afraid of no creature. And I its master. So I dreamed.

~~When~~ I became a man I decided to go for a bigger prize: I became a preacher. Tigers were small stuff, child's play. I was after the really big game now. I wanted to chain the one who had never been chained, to imprison the one who had been forever free. I wanted him to do as I commanded, to make my wish his desire. I wanted to take him in all his unpredictableness and ^{no, its not you that I'm after.} make him as prectable; xaxaxre as the ticking of a clock. I wanted to domesticate God, to tame the Lord, making the tiger into a housecat that would come when I called.

Is that not what religion is all about? Through forms and rituals and laws and commands to put a leash on God, we do this, God will do that. We say our prayers and God will make the rain to fall, we go through a ritual and God will heal the sick person. We confess our sins and God will forgive. We cling to a book and God will have to stay consistent with everything in it. With Buddhists and Hindus and Moslems and Jews and very often Lutherans as well, religions is all the same. We speak and God is supposed to jump. And when he doesn't then people say, "There is no God, otherwise why ^{did he not save the child} ~~doesn't he feed~~ ^{caught in the busy holiday?} ~~the hungry?~~ Or why did he not heal my grandmother of cancer? Or why does he not take away this feeling of guilt in my heart, or my sorrow? What good is he if he does not serve me?

One day some religious people saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinners. Now the God they had chained up in thier back yard certainly did not approve of this. He had givam a law that told who was in and who was out. Sinners and tax collectors were definitely out. But Jesus told a story.

There was a man with two sons, one of them wanted his inheritance. He did not want to wait for his father to die so that he could start really living.

Now the father was free to do as he pleased. He said, Sure, Son, I'll do that for you.

~~Now~~ ^{wanted the inheritance with sinners} The son went away, ~~was at all~~, found himself poor, hungry, the tender of pigs. He said to himself, "Time to go home, at least there is food ~~xxxx~~ there. And so he came home for food.

Now the Father might have done most anything, I suppose. Might have turned his back, You treated me like I was dead, now I'll do the say with you. He might have said, "You'll find a bunk out in the slave quarters, some chains a bowl of soup. Prove to me you are worthy to come back to the house.

He might have said, "I'm glad you came home son, too bad you have no inheritance left.

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But the father who was free, ran and embraced his son, put the best robe on him, a ring on his ~~finger;~~ hand and shoes on his feet. They killed the fatted calf and celebrated, as if his son had risen from the dead.

Not fair, cried the older brother. Faithfully I've served, there has not been even a goat killed for a party for me, you have no right to celebrate ~~xxxxxxxixkikx~~ the return of one who had done what he has done. Maybe not right but certinaly the freedom.

Just as God was free to choose one ~~women~~ out of all the women in history. A girl, Mary. He was free to bring his Son into the world through her, and free to enter where a manger would be his first bed.

In Jesus God was free ~~to enter human history in one time and one place,~~ to heal a leper here, a blind man there, free to do for one what he would not do for every one.

He was free to feed five thousand one hungry day, to take one father's daughter and raise her from death. And though many older brothers have cried unfair when they see millions starving, and father's sobbing for daughters who

have been lost, God is free.

Even free to be chained to death. Freed to choose the slavery of the cross. God was free in Jesus to suffer and die for sinners. He was free not to do that also. Just as he is free this day, not to forgive your sins and mine, free not to give us faith, free not to grant us salvation. He is free.

Jesus told stories. He did not write down rules and laws, chains with which we might bind God. Jesus ~~is~~ ^{is} the story of a father who was free to raise from death to life the son who ate with the sinners.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, not stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scoffers. So the first psalm says. But when God's own son chose his seat at the table, he sat among the tax collectors and sinners. And was put to death for it. And is greeted even this day with the great celebration, ^{for he who was dead is alive.} ~~that he who was dead is now alive.~~

Free. God is free not to hear my prayer, free to never forgive even the smallest of my sins, free to give me nothing but hell, even here on earth.

What a wonder then when he chooses to have mercy upon us, to give his son to die for us, to make us his sons and daughters. ~~He gives us faith.~~ ~~He is free to make the last first and the first last, the rich poor and the poor rich, the dead alive and the lost found.~~

^{What a wonder when he takes over me} ~~He is even free to take me,~~ one who ^{tried} ~~had tried~~ in every way ~~and who~~ ~~tried~~ to imprison God ~~in a box of my doing~~ so that ^{he} ~~he~~ might serve me, ^{what a wonder when he uses even me} ~~God is free and is free to use even misguided~~ for his purposes. And you. ^{And journey} ~~He is free to journey~~ with us to every far country of our sin and brings us home again.

^{to believe in him} What a wonder and marvel when he does just that. And forgives our sin, and gives us faith, and his peace.