

Rising Up for Equality

by Bentley deBardelaben

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The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from thwarting the exercise of certain individual freedoms: such as freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, and the right to petition. It's the last two items that have been on my mind lately.

The First Amendment's free exercise clause guarantees a person's right to physically gather or associate with others in groups for economic, political or religious purposes. It ensures an individual's right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. These rights are, in part, what separates the U.S. from nations whose citizens are not given such freedoms.

Over and over, in cities large and small, we see citizens who gather to protest against oppression by all levels of government and/or from corporations. What a privilege to have such constitutionally guaranteed rights. We can seek economic redress from unjust compensation or wage theft. We can rally together for fair and just human and civil rights protections for people of color, women, people living with disabilities and/or members of the LGBTQI communities. We can march side-by-side seeking environmental safeguards that benefit the planet and humankind. All these and more are guaranteed us.

Raising one's voice against tyranny or oppression is not a new occurrence. Frankly, I believe it has been ongoing since humankind learned to walk upright. But it takes an enormous toll on one's spirit when we rise up against the dark forces of oppression. As an ordained Protestant minister, I look to scripture to find strength and inspiration while attempting to make sense of what is occurring in the world around me. Jesus modeled how one can rise up and speak out against oppressive powers. He was masterful at teaching those who wanted to learn, follow, and change that no one's humanity was to be treated as less than any other's, to the dismay of those holding power and authority.

In the book, *Rise Up: Spirituality for Resistance*, United Church of Christ executive minister and activist, the Rev. Traci Blackmon beautifully writes these powerful words about Jesus and movement making:

“Follow Me,” Jesus proclaims over and over again as he invites others to help change the world. Some of his actions may be illogical. He is a carpenter from Nazareth telling fishermen to ‘follow him’ and he will make them fishers of men. Who is he to tell them how to fish?”

Rev. Blackmon further pens about the process, “[Jesus’] invitation is broad, and [his] directions are minimal but consistent. All who are willing to join are welcome, but you must ‘follow me.’ . . . The organizing skills of Jesus remind us that true movements of liberation are best led by those who are being oppressed And allies begin to show up, with their bodies and their gifts and their skills, to follow.”

I am proud that my faith offers me the strength, and the Constitution grants me the right, to address the ways in which systems fail and oppress peoples. Knowing that I get to undertake this journey with allies in the struggle is energizing. The journey may be arduous, and is not always successful. But that can be of no deterrence. Simply stated for me, it is the right thing to do.

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