10-1-2012

But Not Destroyed: The Story of Calvin Fairbank

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Godspell
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Beginning in 1844 and ending in 1870, forty-four persons were imprisoned in The Kentucky State Penitentiary for the crime of helping African-Americans escape from slavery.

These forty-four individuals included men and women, Northerners and Southerners, whites and blacks. They came from every walk of life, but held one thing in common: the belief that The Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “all men are created equal” superseded The Constitution’s accommodation of human slavery.

Calvin Fairbank was the most famous of these prisoners. Behind Kentucky State Penitentiary’s stone walls, this Methodist minister was robbed of 17 years of his life; received thirty-five thousand cuts from a rawhide-whip; and faced death from jailors, disease, and overwork.

The question arises: “How could such a thing happen in Christian America?”

The answer lies in the fact that, although antebellum America was founded on Christian principles, many of its laws flew directly in the face of Almighty God. It was perfectly legal to keep black men and women in chains and treat them as animals. It was criminally illegal to help them gain their freedom and accept them as brothers and sisters.

Rev. Calvin Fairbank, however, believed we must obey God rather than man. When he found people being held in bondage, he courageously and whole-heartedly turned law-breaker to set them free.

A century after Fairbank’s release from jail, another freedom-fighter, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote: “one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws.”

Those of us living in 21st century America would do well to remember those words—and Calvin Fairbank’s life.

~William Gebby
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