

While we are away ... reflections for the Pentecost season

July 5, 2020 – 5th Sunday after Pentecost

This is our third season of the Church Year under gathering restrictions. Pentecost began with two special Holy Days— Pentecost Sunday and Trinity Sunday. We are now immersed in the ‘green’ season of Pentecost. We will be following Jesus and his ministry as we think about the Spirit-led ministry of the Church. Here is Pastor Steve’s message for The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost. A copy of the bulletin will be available to supplement “in-house” worship.

Lessons for Pentecost 5

Psalm 145; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:25-30

This is the weekend when we celebrate freedom – the July 4th weekend. It is good to celebrate freedom. Freedom is complex. Freedom is challenging.

The Bible begins by celebrating the most incredible act of freedom – anywhere, anytime – The Creation! The magnificent act of God’s freedom. God freely creating – calling into being light and life, order and harmony. In this glorious act of freedom, God created women and men and freely gave them the divine image and the breath of life to dwell within them. God also freely gave them a garden in which they could live and prosper. It was all theirs: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden”. The garden was all theirs ... except, just one thing, one tree: “*of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.*” No problem, right ...? Big problem, two bites worth!

Our Biblical ancestors waste no time in abusing their freedom, in using their freedom to upset the order and harmony that God, in the first act of freedom had established. They freely listened to the serpent who told them a lie – a lie about God, a lie about themselves. They sinned; they immediately hid from God in the bushes. They would never have their God-given freedom back. From that point on, things between the humans and their Creator would be different, their freedom would be different.

Our national ancestors, whom we often call the Founding Fathers, were seeking political and economic freedom in the 18th century. There were many arguments and phrases they used to rally support and convince themselves to take bold action. “Taxation without representation” is one I remember well. Other words that we remember well are the words that began their Declaration of Independence from a nation far away:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Our national ancestors remembered the first act of Freedom – God’s Creation. They remembered how God had freely created us. They insisted that God’s Creation came with certain rights – life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. This was their way to express the ideals of freedom that they were seeking with their bold and defiant action of 1776: Life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Establishing freedom was to be a ‘work in progress’, lasting long after the war for independence. The Founding Fathers had used that phrase, ‘all men’. Arguably, the plural ‘men’ could include all people. But, they were thinking of men, not women; men with property, men who were white as they started their freedom experiment. Yes, freedom is complex and challenging.

Defeating Great Britain was just the start – there was a Civil War and abolishment of slavery still ahead; amendments to the Constitution to extend and protect voting rights. Beyond

amendments there were still challenges, like Civil Rights and Women's rights. I shared with the children this morning: that the ELCA celebrated the 50th anniversary of women's ordination last week – that was almost 200 years after the declaration of freedom of 1776.

The debates and discussions about freedom are not over – our most recent history indicates that we are still trying to fit into those words, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and what they might mean in a diverse nation of 330 million people. Freedom is challenging!

Paul gives us a personal look at freedom in the 7th chapter of his letter to the Romans. Paul honestly looks at what his free behavior can lead to. He knows what is good. He knows right from wrong. But there is something more to his actions. There is something between him and his freely doing what is right: “*I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.*” Paul says this is **sin**. “*If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin dwells within me.*”

Sin – it comes with the freedom that we inherited from our ancestors. We sin because we believe the lies about God and about ourselves: “This will not hurt me.” “This will not hurt that person.” “God won't mind, God doesn't see me when I hide in the bushes.” Sin – it shuts our eyes, it shuts our brains, it shuts our hearts, it clouds our reasoning. It turns us inward where we focus on ourselves, our appetites. Our appetite for exercising *our* freedom, the process of reaching for that delicious bite, blinds us, limits our view, turns off our filters, deceives our mind that knows what is right. We sin – we fail others, we fail ourselves, we fail God ... we disrupt God's order and harmony.

We will be especially celebrating freedom this weekend, but we give freedom great deference on most days. We want to be free. “Live free or die”, says the license plate in New Hampshire. People living in other states would readily subscribe to this motto. We want to live free and not have Big Brother tell us what to do. This is palpable today in the refusal of some people to follow the COVID guidelines – like social distancing and wearing masks. Wearing or not-wearing masks has certainly blossomed into an issue independent of health guidelines although that does not mean there are not implications for health. I have a hard time understanding how not wearing a mask is the freedom issue that so many seem willing to go to the mat for.

In the opening lines to his treatise, “On the Freedom of a Christian”, Martin Luther said this: *A Christian is an utterly free person, lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is an utterly dutiful person, servant of all, subject to all.* Luther believed that Christ has freed us – through grace and forgiveness, Jesus has set us free from sin. We are free to come out from the bushes, free to take our parts in God's Creation. For Luther, our freedom as Christians meant we are free to serve our neighbors, we are free to act lovingly toward our neighbors. It is my guess, Luther would hear the words of Dr. Fauci talking about guidelines: “*Yes, you have an individual responsibility to yourself, but also a societal responsibility,*” and understand how freedom would direct him: to freely abide by guidelines even guidelines that might limit one's freedom.

Wearing masks is just one of the many issues of our times that makes us weary. Weary of going out, of observing others, weary of listening to news, hearing the latest numbers, weary of hearing the latest report of protests or police violence.

Maybe our 4th of July celebrations were somewhat muted this year - fewer fireworks, fewer crowds, less noise, more time to be quite more time to contemplate this complex and challenging concept called freedom. As we do consider freedom on this weekend, let us contemplate the words of Jesus. The Son, God freely sent to us. The Son, who freely took up his

Cross for us to free us from the consequences of our sin and sinning, the consequences of our bad, thoughtless, harmful use of our freedom. The Son, to whom Paul was led after he contemplated his so-called freedom. The Son, whom Paul found after understanding the wretchedness to which sin brought him. The Son, whom Paul could turn to in relief: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord who rescued me!”

Jesus, who came to us as an expression of God’s freedom to love, speaks some wonderful words to us today. *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* These are words for our weary time. Let us savor them. Let us savor the offer of rest for our souls, our, oh, so weary souls.

Despite the fact that Jesus says he wants us to be yoked, I hear his words as a call to freedom. We know what a yoke is – it connects two oxen to a plow or a cart to work. Yes, but a yoke connects two together – a yoked pair work, walk, plow through the field together. When Jesus says, “Take my yoke.”, he is saying: “Yoke up with me.” Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, my burden is light.” – “you do not need to carry me; “I will not be a burden to you. Let us walk through the fields, sometimes challenging fields of life, together. Let us love God, love neighbor together: “Come, lay your burdens on me, lay your sins on me, lay your weariness on me, experience a freedom that is only possible when you are *yoked in love* to me, *yoked for love* with me.”

Jesus came, freely he came to us, freely he died for us. Jesus came to restore us to the freedom that our ancestors knew in the garden: A freedom to trust God, even a God who sets limits. We can never go back to the Garden, the Garden is closed (see Genesis 3:24), but Jesus frees us from sin. Jesus frees us to come out from our sinning, out from our hiding, so we can receive God’s freeing embrace of mercy and forgiveness and share it with others.

In Jesus, God frees us by yoking us to the Son, to his life, death and resurrection. So, let us find our life and our liberty in this One. Let us join the psalmist’s song of freedom: *Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven; whose sin is covered.*

O taste and see that the Lord is good, happy are they who trust in God. Amen.