

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Freedom and Discipleship

What does it mean to be free? Galatians tells us Christ has set us free

But then we read the gospel and we wonder where the freedom went.

“The idea that freedom means the absence of encumbrances may be popular but it does not hold weight. Freedom is not the absence of entanglements; entanglements are the means by which freedom becomes meaningful...Freedom is not separation from relationships; it is a feature of relationships that becomes especially apparent as a result of our relationships with Jesus Christ.”¹

The question of freedom and the cost of discipleship is one I wrestle with now and again. Today’s gospel passage brought the wrestle back. It seemed to me that every request the potential follower of Christ made was reasonable but Jesus makes it clear that to follow him means to go now. There will be no dilly dallying about as my mother would say.

To be a follower of Jesus means to be focussed on the moment. To be focuses on that which is right and best for all in the moment. And the moment we witness in today’s text is pivotal. Jesus has turned towards Jerusalem. It is a change moment in the life and faith of the disciples and Jesus.

The disciples have been warned that Jesus will not be with them forever and this part of the journey marks the beginning of the end of this level of discipleship. Jesus warned them there is a cost to discipleship. He has been teaching them how to respond to rejection and persecution. And then he leads them into a Samaritan village where they are faced with rejection head on. The texts says the Samaritans did not receive Jesus, because his face was set towards Jerusalem. (We don’t know exactly why Jesus and his disciples were not received but it seems the Samaritans did not like the focus of this band of travelers.

Now understandably James and John are feeling a little anxious but the request to command fire to come down from heaven and consume the Samaritans does seem a little extreme. However it did work for Elijah - which is I’m sure is where they got the idea from in the first place.

¹ Douglas, mark “Feasting on the Word”

But condemnation is not what Jesus wants. Jesus want them to see love and grace are not limited to those who like it. Jesus' forgiveness and healing extends to all people, including the racially and religiously 'mixed' Samaritans. The disciples might remember that it was not long ago that Jesus had told them that when they were rejected they should just shake the dust off of their feet and move on.

And so onward they go towards Jerusalem.

Perhaps feeling the need to comfort Jesus or reassure him the disciples begin to claim their devotion. But Jesus seems to respond rather harshly. Almost with another warning in a sense. It's not that easy he seems to say. You have no idea where following God's spirit will take you "Foxes have holes and birds have nests but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." Elaine Heath responds "God incarnate is essentially homeless, apart from the hospitality of others."

Discipleship will call us to give up something and to have priorities that are different from our own or others. Because living fully as a child of God calls us to Freedom and fullness which means we are not held to the same vices or rules the rest of the world is. "Those who choose to follow in (the divine) path may find that they have no place to call home, either physically or culturally...Following in the Way may put a believer at odds with the secular (or religious) world...our path is identified by the things we treasure the priorities we set, and the way we treat others...(Still) The Christian journey does not demand that we reject our responsibilities to family and vocation but, rather, encourages us to see those needs in the light of our faith and through the lens of our deepening."²

When we live in faith we are to assess our priorities recognize those things that keep us from living freely. We are to look at those things that block and guard and hold us back from fullness and freedom. Paul calls us to recognize those things that enslave us. We experience real freedom when our best, most authentic loves are free from what is hurtful to us and others, from what limits our ability to live and love well.

Freedom is finding a way to live in God's spirit. Freedom of the spirit moves us from being self-centered to God-centered. Freedom works through love. Dan Chambers says "Unbounded Grace is the only thing on earth that makes us genuinely free." It is God's spirit that offers that freedom which will bring us to walk in the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and self-control. As we live in the spirit of the Divine we will live with such Graces. God's spirit is never about living alone or selfishly it is always communal. God's spirit is about uniting community, drawing people together in love and grace and all the fruits of the spirit.

In today's text Paul makes seemingly impossible requests of us as he gives a long list of don'ts. We will not stay free of all things like quarrels and gossip and envy and the list goes on. But the flesh that Paul wants us to be free's from is self centered living. To Paul to live a God-centered

² Shaffer, Richard "Feasting on the Word"

life is to live a life of loving service for the benefit of others. Faith is found in working and living love. Love is the way that freedom in Christ expresses itself. Indeed, freedom in Christ makes radical loving service possible, which fulfills the will of God for human relationships.

So Freedom does not mean anything goes. Freedom means living into the fullness God has created us for. To be healthy and free actually may be a bit of work. To be healthy and free may mean we have to check our self-indulgence at the door. To be healthy and free will require us to look at the things that bind us or entangle us keeping us from loving others and self. We can find ourselves easily in a church like the United Church saying anything goes - but Paul makes it clear that that is not freedom. I know for myself to live healthy and free requires a few things. I was reminded clearly recently when I allow myself to get consumed by work and family life and obligations others place on me and put aside things like exercise and healthy eating, prayer, meditation and the list went on, it is not pretty what I turn into. I soon find myself not living lovingly but resenting all of the above people and things that I love. See when we forget to free ourselves from the entanglements of life and societal expectation we will not live freely for long. Ask any addict whether your addiction is drugs, alcohol, work, pleasing others, holding a grudge or whatever it may be. Living consumed by those things is not freedom. Freedom requires commitment to self and others.

I read a story that offered a perfect example of this kind of simple freedom.

“Some years ago a member of our congregation carelessly hurt the feelings of another. I do not recall the details, but remember witnessing the planting of seeds of a rift. The next Sunday I found the one who had given offense waiting anxiously on the front steps of the church, his choir robe billowing in the morning breeze. I noticed and wondered. When the one offended showed up, he held out his arms to her with words of apology. She forgave him with a brief warm hug. They remain friends to this day.

I remember the incident because of the readiness, promptness, and sweet humility with which peace was made. I remember it because of its rarity. I remember it because Christians are charged with giving and receiving such forgiveness. “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”

Our freedom in Christ is not evidenced by results but by our character...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.” God’s spirit is always a uniting spirit drawing us together as community in love for one another. May we so live.

Amen.