

The Freedom to Become

I must admit, in all the times I have read the gospels, I don't remember ever noticing this story before: The Samaritans did not listen to Jesus so the disciples asked, "Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" These folks didn't receive Jesus as the messiah and so his disciples, who had been traveling along with him for a couple of years, still thought that what he might want is for his followers to smite them with fire from heaven. I thought about preaching on that uplifting little anecdote, and maybe how some of Jesus' followers seem to still mistakenly think that's what he wants, but I might need to contemplate that story just a little more before I'm ready to sermonize on it – like three more years until it comes up in the lectionary again.

However, the rest of the gospel passage is not that much better. This is the Christ at his most enigmatic, and frankly, grouchiest. Three different people profess that they want to follow him, and each time he dismisses their seemingly reasonable concern or request. There must be more to this story for it to be elevated to the status of Gospel – good news. It is moments like these that I am thankful for the lectionary, and the fact that we always get multiple readings each service to interpret, enhance, and explain one another. So let's step back for a moment and look at our Galatians text.

It begins, "For freedom Christ has set us free." It seems so obvious as to be almost unimportant or at least easily overlooked. But I think it is everything. Freedom is not what we so often think of it as. God did not set us free so that we could choose- between right and wrong, good and evil, destructive habits and enlivening ones. Christ set us free for the sake and state of freedom – so that we could be unshackled and able to become who we were created and called to be in him. When we talk about freedom in a theological sense, we are not saying that God has set you free to make any choice you want. That's simply not a goal, because the ability to choose to be enslaved again, by turning to any of those things Paul's destructive sin list, is just a sign that you were never free. Christ set you free to be who you were created to be in the image of God. We were not freed so that we could be self-indulgent, because that is simply a return to slavery. We were freed to become the loving, gracious, kind and gentle creatures we were created to be in the image of God, as followers of Christ.

The ability to make choices is a vastly overrated and misleading definition of freedom. When we talk about our children being free to grow up to be whatever they want, we don't really mean that we hope they choose to become a doctor or a drug dealer, a social worker or a thief, a generous philanthropist or a bitter hermit, as though those were choices of equal validity. What we mean is that we want our children to be free to figure out, grow into, and become who they were created to be, and we trust that that is positive because they bear the image of a great and loving God. That's what Jesus wants for all God's children too. Choice can be a false freedom.

My former brother-in-law was a sad drug addict who kept relapsing. Heroin and cocaine; it was a terrible type of slavery. Every time after the treatment or rehab we hoped that he had been set free from his bondage to the narcotics. In that hope, we never meant that next time he would be free to choose between taking drugs and not taking them. If he were weighing

those things as though they were equal – a destructive moment of mindless bliss versus living into his full potential – then he was not truly free. Free would be loosed from the shackles of addiction to become all that God had made him to be.

What the church means when we talk about freedom in Christ is that we want each of you to be free to converse with God in a holy dialogue so that you can hear what it is that God is calling you to do with your time, talents, life experience and cumulative abilities. Free to become what you were created for, *in Christ*. That last part is important because it is the only lasting freedom. All else is return to slavery.

And if I can return for just a moment to that bizarre gospel passage to see how this relates, I think the reason that Jesus seems so grouchy here is that he had set his sights on Jerusalem to go and make real and final the saving work he had come to do, to accomplish the freeing of all from the slavery of sin, and yet even his own followers were willing to return to the bondage of death dealing. How could they stand in the life-giving presence of the Christ and still choose petty anger that lead to destruction? That was not freedom. No one who had known the gospel of life, no one who had experienced it and been set free from the condemnation of sin and death, could think that smiting people was what Jesus would want. No one who knew the freeing words of good news could imagine going back to the crushing bondage of condemnation, and so he rebukes them.

And then he tests the others who come to follow him to make sure that they are ready to leave behind the encumbrances of their old life to become more fully themselves, and help the world become, what God was calling them to be. Jesus is telling them you can't go back again to the rituals of death rather than hoping in the resurrection. You can't halfway engage in the work of the harvest and look back longingly, because then you are not truly free.

I don't really think Jesus in this harsh-sounding passage is truly opposed to burying the dead; we have funerals as part of our faith tradition after all. But they are not focused on death. They are Easter celebrations the prayer book tells us. Not because grief is wrong, but because we can't get stuck there. We must march on with Christ to where he is going, and that is resurrection. In that, he is freeing us from the bondage of hopelessness. Once you have set your hand to the plow do not look back and be tempted by a life that was not walked with Jesus, that was not marching on toward resurrection, that was not preparing the way for salvation for all. When you are set free, grasp the freedom to become all of who God has made you to be. I think that is what we are to gather from this text today.

There is a beautiful example in an old story told of when Nelson Mandela was freed from his wrongful imprisonment in Apartheid South Africa, a reporter asked him, "Are you angry, sir? Do you hate those who imprisoned you?" The obvious answer for anyone who knows his story and lives by the logic of our world would have been, "yes and I want to see them punished." But instead he replied, "I have lost too many years of my life to the prison cell. To spend any more in the prison of hatred would be a loss to great to bear." There was a man who knew the gospel. He had been set free for the sake of freedom, and he could not choose bondage to hatred and call that choice freedom. Instead, he accepted his freedom to become who God was calling him to be as a reconciler who made Christ's kingdom a little more evident in his country.

To love unencumbered by jealousy, envy, or hatred. To act in kindness that puts away enmity, disregards factions, and quells quarrels. To be generous without smallness, pettiness, or

judgment. To be truly faithful in a way that does not make an idol of your own sense of purity. To do it while being gentle, with a gracious spirit, and in control of your own self. To follow the Christ through the valley of death into the hope of resurrected life. These are what the freedom for which Christ has set us free look like. This is what we were set free for. All else is to be yoked again in slavery. It is a tall order, but such freedom is worth the striving. May the Spirit of God guide us into such a life. Amen