

Free To Love -- Proper 8C – Pent+6

For freedom Christ has set us free. Free to do what exactly? Here's a guy whose sphere of influence was exceedingly small in his lifetime, and who got himself executed as a political prisoner. Yes indeed, we remember joyfully the day and the phenomenon of resurrection, but of all the other martyrs since then -- and there have been quite a few -- of that lot, none have been resurrected. They stay dead. Their spiritual power continues to resound with us, and the memory of their deeds lives on, but they are not only merely dead, they're really most sincerely dead. So what is this freedom, for which Christ has prepared us? Is it just freedom to die? We've talked about this before, the great benefit and power of a life of faith being the choice of how to die. But most of us are interested in living. So we want to know what the freedom is. If we are to follow Jesus, we may understand that our payoff will be far more spiritual than material, but we still want to have some idea of what the reward is. I'm reminded of the trio of Hyenas in *The Lion King* – when Jeremy Irons (as Scar the evil brother) recruits them hyenas for his nefarious deeds, he says, “I know it sounds sordid, but you'll be rewarded when at last I am given my dues, and in justice deliciously squared; be prepared! The Hyenas (led by Whoopi Goldberg) respond: “Prepared? Sure, we'll be prepared. For what?”

Of course Scar is anything but a role model, but ‘For what’ indeed, are we being prepared, in this free-setting God has dealt us? As always, there is a paradox in the story, a ‘yes, but’ that shakes us up and wakes us up and challenges us to live our lives differently than before, differently from our natural inclinations. The paradox is this: We are set free in order to be freely enslaved. Or you might say, ‘we surrender to become

victorious,' or perhaps, 'we give away all power in order to possess it.' What the heck?

A friend recently gave me a fascinating article about a Japanese monk who has spent much of his life interacting with and counseling would be suicides. The rate of suicide is higher in Japan than almost anywhere, where it is not looked on as an ungodly or dishonorable act. Nevertheless, the Japanese people in general, and their mental health community in particular are anxious and eager to prevent people doing themselves in.

The story of this monk has two main thrusts: his work with the suicidal is frustrating, endless and inconclusive. People don't get better, they just keep talking to the monk. Once he stops talking with them, they just go ahead and do it. The other subject of the story is this monk's early training. Together, these aspects of this one life can help us understand what God would have us know about following the path of Christ. The training can only be described as grueling, not something you and I would ever want to take on, with little sleep and much hardship and almost nothing in the way of validation or encouragement. The goal is to attain a state of total awareness of one's self, one's surroundings, and one's connection to a reality beyond material, mortal and selfish concerns – a state of peacefulness and choice about how to respond to whatever life brings.

And his interaction with the suicidal folk who seek the monk's counsel eventually results in the realization that he can't fix everybody, he can't stop people from being unhappy or fixated on doom, he can only help and support those who choose to be helped. A most telling incident is one wherein a man walks several days to seek the monk's advice and finally reaches the monastery. By the time such a great effort has been made, the

man realizes that he doesn't need help anymore. The fact of his effort has convinced him he wants to keep living after all.

As Elisha, the anointed successor to Elijah persists in following his spiritual mentor, in staying close and asking for more and stronger connectedness – the double portion of power he crazily demands – his seriousness and worthiness demonstrate themselves, and he takes over the prophet's role.

When Jesus 'sets his face to Jerusalem,' indicating that he is determined to see his destiny through, he is surrounded by people who would get on the bus with him, but who have little idea of the cost of such a ride. There is rejection, and there are difficult, even excruciating choices to be made. Jesus is not telling us that our work, our relationships and our families have no importance. He is pointing out that we may have to undergo grueling choices. Like the training monk, we may not be validated or encouraged, let alone gratified as followers of the way. But our goal, our 'face to Jerusalem' must be an ever-present reality. And only if we choose to remind ourselves of this, can we be truly free.

As Paul writes, '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." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.' Otherwise, we are just 'Cats of Kilkenny.' As the limerick goes: "There once were two cats of Kilkenny, who both thought there was one cat too many. They fought and they fit, They scratched and they bit, Til apart from their nails, and the tips of their tails, Instead of two cats there weren't any."

So what is it we are free for, after all? On March 7, 1965 approximately 600 people left Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma, Alabama on a march to Montgomery. They were seeking voting rights for African American citizens. When the group reached the Edmund Pettis Bridge they were violently attacked by police on foot and on horseback and a group of citizens who had been recruited as a "posse." The "posse" used rubber tubes wrapped with barbed wire. The day became known as Bloody Sunday. 70 – 80 people were injured and 17 were hospitalized overnight. The group was undeterred.

The violence so horrified a nation that two days later 1500 people gathered from around the country to join the group. Led by Martin Luther King Jr. the marchers were once again met by state troopers King knelt, led the group in prayer and returned to Brown Chapel to avoid violence.

The third attempt to march to Montgomery began on March 21 when thousands gathered in Selma. President Johnson, ordered the National Guard to protect the marchers. Only 300 were allowed on the road to Montgomery. They walked about 12 miles a day in temperatures which fell below freezing. They slept in farmer's fields where local churches brought food and blankets. It rained almost every day.

Today we live in an era when there is a national, public discussion about whether enough progress has been made on voting rights. We can both celebrate statistics that show improvement, and at the same time deeply question decisions that assume the work is done. The fact is that despite great progress, examples of people fraudulently voting or trying to vote in America number 0, whereas many thousands of legitimate would-be voters continue to be impeded or effectively deprived of that right to this day.

So we must continue to improve. And this is exactly the freedom to which Christ has called us. It is a real freedom, wherein all participate and the outcome is just and thus Godly. And it struggles against the enslavement to power and fearmongering, privilege and position that keeps us from our true path. The old bumper sticker asks, "If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?" Following this path means taking the risk of a kind of freedom that can feel very uncomfortable indeed. Because it is a discipline. It is a commitment. Paul would call it an enslavement to each other. It is a discipline of asking ourselves each day – even each moment – ‘Do the words of my mouth, the meditations of my heart, the causes I support, the votes I cast truly reflect what Jesus means by freedom and neighbor love?’ As the feller says, “No one among us has attained anything like perfect adherence to these principles, the point is we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. We seek progress, not perfection.” And it starts with not kidding ourselves, neither about our progress, nor about our motivations for the changes we seek.