

Sermon – Proper 8 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Romans 6: 12-23

Tomorrow is the Feast Day of St Peter and St Paul. These apostles are two of the great pillars of the church. Peter and Paul are fascinating people but Paul in particular is a really interesting character. He can come across as tough and unyielding but he also doesn't shy away from being vulnerable and humble in the difficult work of his ministry as a teacher of Jesus' message of love and welcome.

One of his most meaningful statements for me is recorded in Acts 20 v19 where he acknowledged to the Ephesian community that he had "served the Lord with humility, and with tears." For Paul, the work of the gospel was hard! For us it is no less easy.

Paul's transformation from zealous Jew to humble follower of Jesus is quite remarkable. He was changed by his encounter with Jesus, initially on the road to Emmaus and then during his time in the desert wilderness. His zealous anger was quieted and redirected to his new ministry as God honed his skills and temperament for the ministry work he was called to do.

Paul evolved to experience the world through the freshness of the gospel rather than through the lens of the prevailing culture. The experience took him to new depths of understanding about God's presence and work in the world and he learned that God welcomed all people because all belonged to God as created beings in the world, both Jew and Greek alike.

God, through Jesus provides the way for all people to enter this one great community of faith. The means are conveyed in the grace of God freely given, and through God's grace unconditional love and wholesale welcome. God only asks of us that our attitude to our fellow community members be consistent with God's attitude of welcome and acceptance. Difference, Paul says, does not count in Jesus' eyes. The only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Jesus calls us all forward to change our lives and to receive true freedom. True freedom in Jesus' teaching is not necessarily freedom from oppression, freedom from slavery, freedom from sickness or freedom from poverty. It is freedom from sin, and all the weight and bondage that sin piles on to us. Freedom comes through grace, repentance and forgiveness.

True freedom however, comes with a lot of responsibility. Paul writes to the Romans to remind them of the responsibility that comes with freedom. He says that when they were made free their natural inclination was to fall away from God, and God's way.

Essentially that is what sin is, a falling short of the mark in our redeemed lives. The mark that God sets starts with the original law, the ten commandments and follows with the mark set by Jesus in his two great commandments – to love God, and love our neighbors. Paul says that

when they fall below the mark they became slaves to sin. But then they became aware and became ashamed of what they had done. The same is true for us.

Sin has a way of dragging each of us down unless we are aware of its impact and make amends. Some people do see freedom as being completely free from all responsibility taking a view that it is ok to continue breaking God's law and then seek forgiveness without any effort to amend one's ways. Michael Corleone's confession to Cardinal Lamberto in Godfather III comes to mind. Paul says that is no way to live in faith.

When we take up the teaching of Jesus Christ and find true freedom we move from slaves or being bound to sin, to being bound to right living or righteousness with God. It is through this profound shift in how we live our lives that we move from death, the eternal separation from God, to sanctification, being set apart by God for holy work, which is our witness for God in the world by our lived example for others.

With true freedom comes significant responsibility in how we live our lives.

This message of Paul should especially resonate with us this weekend as we celebrate with the LGBT community the 51st anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, that was the catalyst for the birth of the LGBT rights movement. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people have been persecuted for centuries. In many parts of the world even today, a LGBT person can be arrested and jailed just for being who God made them to be.

LGBT people in the west have been somewhat liberated from the oppression wrought by successive generations, although revealing one's sexual identity is still fraught with danger and apprehension in many communities. This is especially true now with transgender people. The church has been torn over this issue with a split occurring in many denominations around the binary choice of accepting LGBT people for ordination or not. The Church continues to discriminate on the basis of sex and race even though we have these teachings in scripture.

The recent decision of the US Supreme Court clarifying that discrimination on the basis of 'sex' in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, includes all LGBT and Queer people, not just males and females, has hopefully put to rest workplace discrimination for the LGBT community. The 6 – 3 decision restored some sense of hope in the court that is struggling with a perception that it rules only in politically partisan ways.

The Church has much work to do around these issues. It is hard for anyone who feels discriminated by parts of the church to feel Jesus' love and to feel that in Jesus Christ they can be truly free. As we stand with all communities under oppression we welcome so as to show the path to true freedom whilst we join hands to fight for societal freedom for all.

Civil rights protest movements have at their core the concept of freedom and equality and the desire for their constituents to be fully accepted in society. Freedom is the hope of many

including refugees fleeing poverty and oppression in their homelands, women, girls and young men caught up in sexual slavery, low paid migrants and victims of domestic abuse.

Freedom in a cultural and human rights sense never really came to African American slaves after emancipation because of the continued action of the state to bind them up in various ways to reduce their humanness and their rights. However, true freedom did come through their faith in God. Faith in God gave them hope that someday their trial would be over and faith continues to underpin the black community as it struggles for complete equality in this country.

Freedom is a dream of hope that drives people on in their fight for recognition and justice. Black Lives Matter movement and ongoing racial justice work by many people and NGOs have been given renewed life through the tragic death of George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks, Breonna Taylor and many more young black men and women.

The premise that God delivers God's people from slavery is, or should be, at the heart of every Christian community of faith. When we are delivered from slavery to sin we become free persons, and in being liberated we work within our community to welcome and free all others. Paul suggests that we should "through love become slaves to one another," rather than slaves to cultural rules.

Archbishop Rowan Williams writes in his book *Meeting God in Paul*, "The freedom Paul is interested in is something radically different. It is above all a freedom from thinking that you need to satisfy God before God will welcome you, that, in Paul's eyes, is the biggest slavery of all: imagining that you must make God happy before God will invite you in. Get rid of that, Paul is saying, and your slavery is over and the true freedom begins." He goes on, "God is 'pleased' with you in the simple sense that [God] has decided to invite you and accept you. [God] is already welcoming you, from all eternity."¹

Paul's evolving understanding of true freedom is a balm for the world. To believe that we need to satisfy God before God will love us puts us in a position of wondering what is 'good enough.' These feelings of not being 'good enough' pervade our culture and inhibit people's relationship with God, keeping them under the yoke of sin. When people feel they are not good enough they often fall away from God's open welcome. In falling away many become entangled in their desires, become slaves to sin, hoping to find acceptance and belonging there. It is a terribly sad reality.

So how does real freedom through the spirit work? I want to quote again Rowan Williams, "If it's freedom from anxiety about an unknown and unpredictable God, it's freedom from those behaviors that go with such anxiety – the passionate self-concern that seeks its own security, the fear that others are doing better or are more deeply loved than we are, the search for gratifications of every sort. It is freedom from new kinds of relationships in which we are at last

¹ Williams, Rowan *Meeting God in Paul. Reflections for the Season of Lent*, Westminster John Know Press, Louisville, KY, 2015 p36

able to contribute to each other's life and well-being instead of threatening and feeling threatened by each other. It is also a freedom to bring good news to each other. Christian freedom is the liberty to let God do God-like things in you – to give life, to promise forgiveness and reconciliation, to communicate hope in word and action.”²

Freedom comes from God and Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This may be as simple as opening one's self up to the suffering and oppression of others. A big issue that has opened through the evolution of the racial justice movement has been the acknowledgement of economic factors in racial inequity. Most Americans gain their wealth from buying a house and paying off a mortgage over 20-30 years just in time for retirement. For many descendants of slaves what followed emancipation was a systematic denial of wealth creation opportunities.

God is always trying to break out of what is a groaning and struggling world, filled with judgement, frustration, anger and jealousy. God frees us from being slaves to this world and through our liberty brought by the spirit of God, we can help to lead others to freedom too.

Paul says to his friends in another part of his letter to the Romans, “All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. And the spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery, leading you back into fear, but the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry, ‘Abba, father,’ the Spirit affirming to our spirit that we are God's children” (8:14-15)

People like Paul, and many of the other great saints of the church, worked in ways to help their communities cultivate a world where the full nature of God is made visible and effective.

Our calling as a community of faith is to work together to cultivate a culture here that openly loves and welcomes everyone just as God has loved and welcomed us. God helps us to deconstruct the many forms of racism and other oppression that pervade the country and by doing our small bit more people will be freed from oppressed lives, and begin to live lives in the fullest as God intended all of us to experience.

Amen.

² ibid p36