

## *“Freedom in Christ”*

*A homily by The Rev. Br. AJ Jonah Buckley  
June 28, 2020 Proper 8A 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Pentecost*

Freedom can mean so many things. Often it can be thought of as free reign to do whatever we want. I’ve been told Oregonians can be very “you can’t tell me what to do” kind of people. I’ve lived here for five years now, married into this beautiful and wonderful state and people via my husband who’s a native Oregonian. Chalk it up to the pioneer spirit. I had a conversation with my father-in-law the other day in regards to freedom and obedience to God and how it can be a struggle. It makes sense to want to have a sense of control; it definitely can feel terrifying to have no sense of control over our situation. But the thing is we don’t get to control God. Ultimately, we’re not as independent as we might think we are. While fierce independence can sometimes be an admirable trait in some cases, in Paul’s letter to the Romans, he shows us this is not so in regards to our relationship with God. Freedom in Christ doesn’t give us a blank slate to do whatever we want. It always asks the question of the impact upon my neighbor (the people, the land, the trees, the wildlife); will this decision impart love and mercy? Our freedom in Christ comes from our recognition and full surrender to God and God’s dream for our world, not our own. When we blaze ahead on our own trail, doing what we want, and telling God what to do, Paul asserts that the end result is death. This seems to be true—sometimes literal death—through war, disease and famine---the results of the greed of some. It can also be the death of friendships, of trust, of love when pride or greed or envy or lust or sloth gets in the way. Greed narrows our view and thinks only of self, which is the shadow side of fierce independence, not recognizing our need of others. This may be why Jesus often talks of the poor being blessed. A poor person knows that they need their community. There is often a mistaken idea that we can do it all on our own. It’s not recognizing that everything we have is a gift from God. This is the significance of the offering in the worship, to offer symbols of our life and labor to God, and secondly to recognize that all comes from God and goes to God.

This is one example of God’s grace evident in our life. You see, God’s grace is a free gift, but if we choose sin we reject that gift. Grace is never taken away. It’s always available. Grace is God’s way of pursuing us, chasing us down with love, mercy, and forgiveness, of restoration and reconciliation. However, living under grace, does not, as Paul argues, give us free reign to go willy-nilly in our

sinning. What then? Says Paul. “Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” This is no small matter. The wages of sin is death. There is a cost to discipleship. It’s that other word, the O word...Obedience. Obedience and surrender to God and God’s mission sometimes over/against our own. We all want God in our lives when we’re in a pickle, and could use a little divine intervention, but there can often be some hesitation in handing over our whole lives to God. I, for one, struggle with this, and it is important that this struggle is not held inside, that it’s shared with others. That’s part of dedicating our whole selves to God. Freedom in Christ, obedience to God requires humility and humbleness.

I remember at my own ordination, lying prostrate before God and everybody on the floor, surrendering my life to God. That was not easy but it was right; it is where God lead me. I don’t know about you, but there have been times for me when I’ve had my plan all figured out, and thought I’d just tell God my plan and that’d be that. Of course, it never seems to work out that way. A bit of an “excuse me, sir, but you’re sitting in my chair” as the foundress of the monastic order I’m a part of puts it. That’s not how God works. You see, prayer is more about us listening to God, then us telling God what God oughta do for us. There are sure times where I’d like it to go a little differently. But our lives are not our own; they are God’s. In our baptisms we were “marked as Christ’s own forever.” A priest marked our foreheads in the sign of a cross with oil as they said these very words. We are all servants of God’s kingdom. As servants of Christ, we are bound to the service of righteousness, of love, of mercy, of compassion, of forgiveness. We are shackled to a different way of living in this world. One in which, as the Baptismal Covenant states, we seek and serve Christ in all persons, love our neighbor as ourselves; we persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord; we proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; we strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being. We do all these things not of our own accord but with God’s help, by the grace of God.

Freedom in Christ goes beyond fireworks, and barbeques and the celebration of the independence of a single people or nation. It does not stop at the freedom of one nation, or one people, for we belong not to a single nation or single people, but rather are all part of Christ’s body, bound to God’s mission, servants of a Way that looks beyond borders and boundaries in the pursuit of

righteousness, of a life in God. A life of surrender and obedience to God, where we put God first, and ourselves and even our own family second. Our allegiance is to God and God alone. As the ancient Celtic prayer, the Lorica says, I bind unto myself today the strong name of the Trinity, the three in one and one in three. We must daily choose to be bound to God.

As Pastor Brian Findlayson, says “The truth is that not only does our faith in Christ's faithfulness on our behalf gain God's eternal approval for us, but it results in obedience rather than disobedience; it results in right conduct. Sure, we will fail, and sometimes fail badly, but our whole orientation is toward being the person we are already in Christ. So, in simple terms, free grace never means free sin.” Part of our lives in Christ are times of disorientation and reorientation. By this I mean there are times where we can feel hopeless and despair and feel lost and far from God; these are times of disorientation. And, then, when it feels like we're lost from God forever, we find God in new ways; this is reorientation.

Yes: Grace is a given. Grace cannot be lost or taken away. But that does mean we are free to sin. This is why we need to repent, to turn back to God when we lose our way. But, also, God's love and forgiveness are also a given. God never stops pursuing us. God never leaves our side. God's grace is God's power of liberation; we cannot do it on our own.

“Marion L Soards, Professor of New Testament Studies, posits:” ...as Paul the Christian sees it, the law (holy, just, and good as it is) is impotent to resolve the dilemma humanity faces in relation to sin, while grace is God's power per se at work doing for the Christians what they cannot do for themselves.”

So why chose a life bound in service to God and God's dream for the world? A life in the pursuit of peace and justice and mercy sometimes in direct opposition to a life that might lead us to money, fame, or comfort. This is how earth becomes more like heaven. This is how God's dream comes to be here on earth. By working with God. By choosing surrender to God over a freedom-without-boundaries-and-limitations. By the simple act of giving a cup of cold water to one of the little ones as our gospel puts it. By the simple act of throwing on a mask when we go out, and staying six feet apart in these COVID times, we bring life. By protesting and saying no, black lives matter, too..earth becomes more like heaven. An life of abundance. Seek first God's kingdom and God's righteousness and your reward shall be a world with more love, more compassion, more of heaven. Imagine a world with no more war or famine or poverty; this is God's dream, too. When I lived in Chattanooga, Tennessee, serving a campus ministry, a student listened to God's nagging in

the form of anger at running past hungry people and doing nothing about it. And so I said to him and the others gathered around that table at the pub, meet me at the church on Tuesday. So we did. And we made 90 burritos and walked downtown to where we knew the poor often gathered. We fed whoever was hungry. Soon, the handful of students and myself gathered every Tuesday, making 200 hotdogs or burritos and carting down water in our wagon. The reward: people who were hungry, people who were thirsty were now fed. We didn't solve poverty or homelessness in Chattanooga, but we did bring a meal to those in need in the name of Christ, and prayed for those whom we met. It really can be as simple as a cup of cold water to a needy one. Listen to where God might be leading you to serve God's dream where you live. Who are the needy ones here? What freedoms are you willing to give up in order that others might live? **Amen.**