

Proper 8 Year C: 29 / 30 June 2019  
St. James' Episcopal Church, Clinton NY  
The Reverend Gary Cyr

**“True freedom, when centered in Christ, is one that says you are free to be who God created you to be.”**

1 Kings 19: 15-16, 19-21

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

Psalm 16

What is freedom? On the cusp of our nation's "birthday" when we celebrate the liberation from an overlord with its feudal system of governance, I find myself pondering that question: What is freedom?

The answer, I believe, is often dependent upon the individual, since each of us has different life experiences, were born into different life conditions and have faced a varying array of challenges dependent on those conditions and experiences. But if I were to try a summary of the question it might suggest that freedom is freedom from something.

Freedom from government regulation; from government intrusion in our lives is somewhat the hallmark for many of what freedom entails. After all, no one really likes being told what to do or how to live. We want the liberty to do what is right for ourselves then wrap whatever that is in the cloth of freedom. But we are deluding ourselves in a very myopic way.

If this is how you understand "freedom" you may just be a little privileged and a benefactor of our current social and economic system, for one person's pursuit of liberty can be and often is another's burden and pain.

The late theologian, James Cone, argued that freedom is found in the form of liberation from oppression, which, for the Christian, is dependent on one's relationship with God through Christ. In other words, a relationship with Jesus is a relationship with the Father where the Spirit is grace personified. When you have that relationship established and you nurture it, you are truly free, for no earthly condition can then imprison you. Relationship with God through

Christ is genuine liberty where one is free to be who they were meant to be in the eyes of God, their true source and life.

I will follow you, Jesus, but let me go tend to business first - I have a few accounts that I need to finalize. I will go with you Jesus, just give me a moment to say good-bye to my loved ones. Come and stay with me Jesus, only give me a little advance notice so I can tidy up the house and put clean linens on the bed before you arrive. I want to follow you Jesus, just... (fill-in the blank). I want to follow Jesus – now add your conditions to doing so. That’s the message Luke provides us with in today’s reading: the conditions we place on our willingness to follow Jesus.

In general, there is usually a cost associated with relationships. Sometimes it is very subtle such that we do not notice it. Other times it is so obvious it is right in our face. A relationship with the sacred, with the Divine is no different. It comes down to what we value: Is our relationship with God of more value to us than our cherished . . . (again, fill-in the blank according to your own circumstances). Each and every one of us has something in our lives’ that we cherish, that brings meaning and purpose to our existence. If there is something you love doing, that brings you to life, so to speak, that may be where your treasure lies; “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Words we will hear Jesus speak a little later in Luke’s Gospel – LK 12.34). What do we treasure enough to surrender it fully so that we can follow Jesus; so that our relationship with God is nourished? Before you answer, know that there is a difference between what we treasure being vitreous or being a vice.

Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, is extolling this very question, acknowledging the difference between vices and virtues. He is cautioning them about allowing their passions (and we are speaking of these in the Greek sense which are things that do not edify one’s wellbeing nor the betterment of society). Passions which can thwart their fledgling relationship with God through Christ. For if we are enthralled by these passions, swept-up in their allure, then we are not free to follow Christ.

Now Paul gives a long list of possible vices that he suggests as being detrimental to a life in Christ. To better grasp what Paul is teaching, we turn to another epistle as a means of unlocking the essence of Paul’s admonition.

In the first letter of John (2.15-17) we hear the author say to his audience: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.” Or as Paul says regarding the will of God, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Therein lays the love of the Father.

Surrender your passions so as to foster relationship with your neighbor and with God. Do not give in to your vices, your base nature, but love your neighbor. There is a cost to that love, my friends. Do not be fooled into thinking otherwise. For example: I am sure there are some Democrats here today. Go find a Republican and love them. If you are a Republican, go find a Democrat and love them. No one is saying you have to like them or think like them; just love them. Now tell me there is no cost to loving those with whom one disagrees with. Tell me there is no cost to fostering relationship with our neighbor in order that we may foster relationship with God. Tell me that this is easy, and I will tell you that you are simply fooling yourself.

Jesus says, “follow me” and we are invited to answer. What will that answer be, for the cost of accepting that invitation can be very costly, just ask Elisha. There is much in the story of Elisha that I, personally, can relate too. For Elisha, the cost of following Elijah is everything. He kills the oxen, boils their flesh upon a fire made from the plow he was using and gives it all to the people. Elisha gives over everything to become a servant to all. My own call to ministry, to follow Christ in this very specific way has been similarly costly. Whenever I share this, people often are quick to point out that I chose to do so. Yes, I did. Just as Elisha, I said yes. That “yes” cost a life’s savings that I no longer have, but the rewards far outweigh what I gave up. In other words, I followed my bliss.

To follow your bliss is a phrase coined in the 1970s by Joseph Campbell. It means to put one’s self on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you and the life you ought to be living. For me, that path was a theological education which empowered me to proclaim the Good News of Christ by which I am then able to walk with others in their sacred journey. Does this mean I do not have other passions? That I do not have other desires? That I

do not have a vice or two? No. I have them, that is simply part of being human. What it means is that I do not give into them, by which I am then free to pursue the fullness life has to offer because I have embraced Christ within me; that I have purposely chosen to follow Jesus and have a relationship with God. This does not mean everyone has to be ordained. No. It simply means be aware of where your heart lies. Does it lie amongst vices or virtues? Know what you truly value. Success, in this regard, is not measured by the standards of the world. It is measured in one's relationship with Christ – a relationship that liberates us from oppression and the falsehood associated with one's vices. Be virtuous in whatever track God places you upon. For one form of relationship fosters life, the other diminishes it.

True freedom, when centered in Christ, is one that says you are free to be who God created you to be. It is freedom to an education; freedom to health care. It is freedom to affordable housing and access to proper nourishment. It is freedom to express yourself in ways that bring meaning to one's life. It is freedom to pursue your bliss. It is not freedom from something (though that is often necessary) but towards something. And that something is Christ.

What then are the conditions you place upon Jesus' invitation to follow? What encumbers your freedom to be in Christ?