

The Freedom to Choose what is Right! Readings: Deut. 10:12-21; Mt. 5:43-48 July 2, 2023
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What is the most difficult passage for you in today's biblical readings? Was it the passage from Deuteronomy claiming that God doesn't play favorites and makes sure orphans and widows are treated fairly? Perhaps it is the passage where God is described as loving the stranger by providing them with food and clothing and then demanding that we treat them with the same loving care! Treating foreigners, immigrants, strangers, and refugees with loving care is a difficult order for our nation, especially as thousands of people line up along our southern borders. These folks are looking for a better life for their families, a place where they will not be terrorized by gangs. Perhaps one of the reasons our legislators have failed to develop a bipartisan immigration policy to deal with the influx of refugees is because we are paralyzed with fear: fear of scarcity, fear of safety, fear of a lack of jobs; or in the case of most politicians, fear of not being reelected. Making decisions based on fear is a spiritual problem requiring some deep spiritual work. Fear diminishes our love for one another.

On the other hand, maybe you struggled with the passage from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Enemies? Really? I know for myself and perhaps for you too, it can be very difficult to forgive those who have hurt us; to heal from the resentments that have been built up over the years. "An eye for an eye, only makes the whole world blind." (Mahatma Gandhi) The practice of forgiveness is perhaps our most important contribution to the healing of the world.

And even though we might want to forgive or have compassion for the stranger, there are internal forces operating in our heart and mind (like fear, prejudice, and ignorance) that hinder our inner freedom. These internal forces keep us in bondage to dysfunctional behavior and impede our spiritual progress. Today, I would like to talk about Christian Freedom: the freedom to do what is right; the freedom to become the people that God created us to be. I will use the gospel as my text.

This week, we will celebrate the 247th anniversary of our nation's founding; the day on which the Declaration of Independence from British rule was signed by 56 courageous and self-sacrificing leaders. It reads: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness... That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government..." (Declaration of Independence)

"Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness!" The terms "liberty" and "freedom" and have often been used interchangeably. This can cause a great deal of confusion because their definitions are actually quite different. Liberty is predominantly an external construct. It is the state of being free within a society from oppressive restrictions imposed by authority on one's way of life, behavior, or political views. Some of the liberties that we Americans have enjoyed over the centuries include the right to practice one's religion, the right to free speech, the right to protest, the right to bear arms, and trial by jury. I am forever grateful for these liberties and feel blessed to live in this country.

Like Patrick Henry and the other early patriots, I too echo his passion: "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!" In this spirit, I will continue to strive for justice and the dignity of every human being by supporting those policies and political candidates whose mission is to extend civil rights and liberties to all citizens regardless of race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, nationality and religious affiliation. I hope you will do the same. "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." (MLK Jr.)

Freedom however, is a little different from liberty. Freedom is an internal construct, a "condition that exists within our mind." It is the ability to choose one's attitude in any given set

of circumstances without being hindered by internal forces or influences like fear, prejudice, greed, or discouragement. Christian freedom is the ability to think, act, and make decisions based on the principle of compassion; the kind of sacrificial compassion that Jesus modeled as the way, the truth, and the life. According to the Christian worldview, true freedom is not a matter of doing what you want without restraint. It is cultivating the right desires and living in obedience to God's will. In other words, true freedom results when our desires align with God's will.

In today's gospel, Jesus said to the crowd: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." (Mt. 5:43-44) In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus sets forth God's vision of a new world order where genuine and unconditional love is the operating principle. It is a blueprint for a different kind of society where anger, hatred, retaliation, and war have no place; where destructive human relationships come to an end. It is a call to stop the vicious cycle of violence and enemy making; where we no longer fight fire with fire but rather quench fire with water.

This is a vision of inner freedom where we rise above our human tendency to retaliate, rise above our negative emotions, rise above our bodily cravings, rise above our addictions, rise above our sinful impulses, rise above our painful memories, and rise above our past traumas in order to enjoy the abundant life that God has called us to embrace.

So the question for us today is this: Are you ready to do the spiritual work required to be set free? This is a conscious decision that needs to be acted upon day after day. Most people desire this inner freedom. I know I do! However, this desire for freedom needs to be cultivated and nurtured into fruition. It is difficult work. For some, this means letting go of past resentments and undertaking the spiritual work of forgiveness. "Forgiveness is unlocking the door to set someone free and realizing you were the prisoner." (Max Lucado) We need to begin to live life for what tomorrow has to offer, not for what yesterday has taken away.

Perhaps in your search for inner freedom, you require some additional outside help to realize this freedom. Therapy can be an excellent choice! So many folks have become wounded by our imperfect society. Others have had their hearts broken by damaged individuals, many of whom are doing the best they can with what they know. This sets up an emotional and physiological blueprint in our inner being that can distort our thinking and restrict our freedom to choose what is right and healthy. The good news is, this is not a life sentence. It's an injury, a wound; one that can be healed.

Afterall, "if you don't heal what hurt you, you will bleed on people who didn't cut you." That is why it is so important we do this inner spiritual work. What a waste it would be if we spent our lives unconsciously projecting our old wounds onto other people. What a tragedy it would be if we spent our lives running away from authentic love and connection because we didn't receive it as a child or can't recognize it as an adult.

We while we cannot accomplish this task of internal transformation by our ego strength alone, we must pray for the grace to heal. A life of prayer is vital in order to achieve inner freedom. For it is only through grace (not reason or laws or will power) that will ultimately release us from the internal bondage of all that harms the creatures of God.

And so today we continue to seek after this grace as we pray: "Lord God Almighty, you have made all the peoples of the earth for your glory, to serve you in freedom and in peace: Give to the people of our country a zeal for justice and the strength of forbearance that we may use our liberty in accordance with your gracious will; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen." (BCP 258)