

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

John 17:20-26

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

June 2, 2019

Seventh Sunday of Easter

Rev. 22:12-14,16-17,20-21

---

What does it mean to be free? I think it looks like a lot of hard work. Complicated, difficult, challenging work. Freedom as an ideal is easy to talk about and to aspire to but the path to freedom is something totally different. As in...to be the land of the free means that the home of the brave is essential to the equation. Freedom and bravery go hand in hand.

Of course, we know this from our national identity. We have sung those words thousands of times. But, do we understand it the same way in our hearts and in our homes? I kept grappling with this question all week as I thought about what freedom looks like from our perspective of faith – when the chips are down, when life has trampled over our hopes, when we find ourselves at our limit, feeling defeated and broken. What does freedom look like then? In those moments...I often hear advice like – pray about it, turn it over to God, trust that things will work out for the best, there is a plan for you, all things work for good. How many of those have you heard?

On the surface, these kinds of phrases seem to imply that if we just had enough faith and enough trust in God then God will swoop down, wave a magic wand, and our problems will somehow miraculously be resolved. We will be free from whatever has hurt us. Yet, I have more often found that when I turn things over to God, when the freedom starts to flow, that's when the real work begins.

So, what does freedom look like? In Acts, freedom is a double edged sword. Paul and Silas are traveling through Phillipi and they come across a slave girl possessed by an evil spirit. She is a fortune teller and has brought her owners a great deal of money for her work. But she is tormented. When she encounters Paul and Silas, she notices that there is something holy about these men, there is something holy that she needs. And she begins to call out to them day after day. Desperate for freedom, begging them to notice her. Finally, Paul stops and prays for the spirit to release her.

She is free. Paul has done good. This should be the end of the story. But, it's not. In Acts, we are reminded that freedom comes at a cost and the work is just beginning. The owners of the slave girl are angry and have Paul and Silas put in jail. And, we can only imagine how they may have treated the girl after she was no longer useful to them. What does freedom cost her?

Then, there is the jailer...God breaks the chains that bound Paul and Silas and opens the prison doors. The jailer fears the prisoners have escaped and was about to kill himself for his failure when Paul calls out to him that the prisoners are all there. When the jailer realizes the miracle that has transpired, he asks to be saved and he and his entire family are baptized. He is free but

the journey for his family is just beginning. They are now on the side of those being persecuted. What does freedom cost them?

Freedom is complicated. Remember – freedom requires bravery. And, bravery demands work and grit and faithfulness that you will make it through the journey. It's a belief that with the help of God, we can move through those times that bring us to our knees. But, how do we find that sense of confidence – the kind of confidence that builds bravery when we are scared...scared to face an addiction, scared to recognize that we are in a harmful relationship, scared to acknowledge that we have done wrong, scared to admit we are depressed. Knowing that a change has to happen but fearful of the consequences of taking those steps to claim our freedom.

In many ways, this journey of freedom and bravery is exemplified in the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The journey begins with courage. Courage to state that you are powerless over what has held you in bondage. (That could be a substance, a relationship, an emotion). Then, it moves to the leap of faith to believe in a power greater than yourself who will restore you to wholeness. But, not only must you believe in that greater power, you must turn your pain over to the care of God.

Many of us stop there when we think of freedom. We have turned it over. We have prayed. We have trusted. Now...God take the burden away. Create that miracle. Make things better! But as you know if you have ever faced these kinds of life changing challenges, this is simply where the work begins. Where your bravery is put to the test.

The 12 steps go on to require that you do a deep moral inventory. You have to look at those places within yourself that you would rather tuck away for good so that no one can see. And then you take that inventory and you admit to God, to yourself, and to another person the problems you are facing. You admit your readiness to change. Then you have to humbly ask God to help. Next, you have to make a list of people you have harmed and you must make amends with them all. And above all, you have to keep praying.

The point is this...freedom is a journey with ups and downs and setbacks and victories. But you know if you have ever traveled the path to freedom, that the work that is required is worth every tear and every fear that you have to move through. Freedom calls us to walk beside God, creating an essential interdependence to face the things that call us to be brave.

7 years ago I was going through a divorce. It was a gut wrenching process that took me to the depths of my faith – in my myself and in all that I thought I believed to be true and right and good. Had I failed myself? Had I failed my children? Had I failed God? It took months that turned into years to come to terms with the end of a marriage. It took the help of mentors and counselors, friends and family members to encourage and support me. You think freedom is just around the corner and the problems you have faced will be resolved, that the pain will end if you just make the decision to move on. That first step to change is heartbreakingly painful but

I quickly learned that this step was not the end. As many of you know the pain and anger and forgiveness and healing take years.

At the time of my divorce I was leading a trip to the Taize Community in France for a group of college students. We met one afternoon with Brother Emmanuel, a soft-spoken yet confident brother who described the power of prayer in our lives in the midst of painful times. He said something that truly changed my life and helped guide me through the steps of change. He said that prayer is not magic, nor is God magic. Brother Emmanuel reflected that we too often praise our idea of free will but when the chips are down we suddenly want to become puppets with a divine being controlling our lives. Make the pain go away we pray. Yet, he stated that prayer and our relationship with God isn't like that. Instead, prayer serves as a call to God to work with what and whom God has already created. God won't make us into something we aren't; instead, he will mold and form that which we already are.

And so I began to move forward, living into the person God had created me to be. It became easier to be brave when God stopped being a magician and became my guide, my strength, and my redemption.

Let me tell you one more thing...a hopeful thing. The journey wasn't easy but last week, we all sat together, gathered around a table to celebrate Hollis' graduation. Two families that have grown out of divorce. People who have been angry, who have been hurt. People who have lost faith at times and who have struggled to regain trust. But last week, we laughed, we ate, and we thanked God for bringing us to that table in a renewed light.

God didn't make the path easy. But God made the path possible. That's freedom.

This morning, I want you to consider the cost of freedom and how your faith might help you to be brave when you are desperate to be free from the things that have bound you. Free from pain, free from abuse, free from depression, free from addiction. Whatever it may be. Let God make the path possible. Amen.