

Christ Episcopal Church
Dayton, Ohio
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 9C
July 4, 2010

Today we hear about the struggle of Naaman, commander of the army of Aram (Syria), as he sought to be cleansed of his leprosy. When he finally repents of his hubris, and humbly follows Elisha's instructions to bathe in the River Jordan, Naaman is released from the grip of his illness and is restored to health.

In the Epistle to the Galatians, St. Paul is exploring the theme of freedom in Christ that comes from being obedient. "Bear one another's burdens," he writes, "and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."¹

And in the Gospel of Luke we find Jesus sending seventy people out in mission with very specific instructions on how to pursue that mission: declaring peace, sharing food, caring for the sick, seeking welcome.

In addition to the biblical readings, there is that other foundational text that is (or should be) on the minds of Americans today. It begins: "When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another . . ." The document goes on to make the case for and to declare independence of the American colonies from Great Britain.

It's most remembered lines are certainly these: "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."

Although liturgical-calendar-purists might want to insist that this is the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, in this land and in this context, it is the 4th of July—Independence Day. The theme of freedom permeates all of these texts from Second Kings, Galatians, Luke and The Declaration of Independence.

For some, freedom has to do with no restraint. One is able to do or be whatever one should choose without limitation. But reality intervenes. Many of us don't have the skills or capacities for unlimited choice. I've never had the vocal chords to be a good singer, the muscles and agility to be a professional athlete, nor the grace to be a dancer. There are natural limits placed upon our freedom.

Other limits exist as well. When two people commit themselves to each other they discover new freedom when they "forsake all others."

¹ Galatians 6:2

Our ancestors in faith help us to understand that spiritual and moral freedoms actually result from obedience. When the children of Israel escaped their bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt, they shifted their allegiance to Yahweh—to the God who had brought them out of slavery into freedom. But their new freedom was immediately limited by the covenant that replaced their forced obedience to Pharaoh. The covenant begins with these words:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.”

And then it goes on to set other limits and prescribe behavior:

You shall not make for yourself an idol.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.

Honor your father and your mother.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet.²

Naaman, the Syrian general, discovered that freedom has a cost. In his case, it meant that to be free of leprosy, he had to submit to the discipline imposed by the prophet Elisha. St. Paul and St. Luke both affirm that to experience freedom in Christ we must submit to Christ’s law and follow in his footsteps.

Political freedom also brings with it a discipline, a covenant. The founders of this country understood that freedom from King George III and from Great Britain did not mean freedom without restraint—it did not mean anarchy. Political freedom required commitment to a new discipline and a new political creed. They bound themselves to one another with a Constitution and a Bill of Rights . . . in order to move toward a more perfect union where everyone might have life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

True freedom requires sacrifice—the giving up—the limiting of my freedom for the benefit of others. “Bear one another’s burdens,” Paul said. Jesus put the same thought this way: “He who would gain his life must lose it, and he who would give his life for my sake will find it.”³

So in the strange mathematics of freedom, the more I’m willing to share some of my life and my liberty and my happiness—the more there is for everyone. And we know this to be true in our national experience as we have ended slavery and Jim Crow, as

² See Exodus 20:2-17 for full text.

³ Luke 9:24

we have included women and added to our shores people from many lands and cultures. Freedom expands and freedom can contract—but it's never a zero-sum equation.

In every era there are new battles to fight, more sacrifices to make, more people to be included. The spirits of Pharaoh, Caesar, and King George still walk the earth.

There are some today who want to define freedom without regard for the welfare and freedom of others. They have lost a sense of the common good. They don't understand that calculus that the fewer people are free, the less free I am. And the corollary, the more we're willing to share, to sacrifice, the more freedom there is to go around.

- So some would reduce healthcare, education, even food for poor children.
- They would discriminate against others, because they don't have proper papers.
- One prominent talk show host recently advocated that instead of providing them nutritious lunches, we should teach poor children to dive in dumpsters for their food.
- We're still reeling from the financial shenanigans of a few that have imperiled the global economy.
- We have made super citizens of wealthy corporations to the detriment of hard working folk who've lost their livelihoods.
- All the while the powerful posture and fund-raise and devise slogans and scheme to keep or obtain even more power and wealth.

What motivated the break from England was a long list of grievances—many of which are stated right in the Declaration of Independence. And, at heart, what aggrieved the founders the most was that the Commonwealth presided over by King George III in 1776 did not promote common wealth and did not work for the common good. The interests of private wealth and gain like those of the East India Company took precedence over real people.

The common good is a value that needs to be re-injected into our national dialogue. The common good understands that

We are all equal in the sight of God;
that freedom is God's desire for all of God's children.
Freedom's struggle is on-going . . .

Freedom is not so much independent as interdependent, and it comes with a cost. We Christians should grasp this intuitively, understanding as we do that only as we die to ourselves are we truly free.

This little creed was one of the earliest Christian affirmations of faith in the middle of the first century. We do well to remember and act upon it:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
 who, though he was in the form of God,
 did not regard equality with God
 as something to be exploited,
 but emptied himself,
 taking the form of a slave,
 being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
 he humbled himself
 and became obedient to the point of death—
 even death on a cross.⁴

⁴ Philippians 2:3-8