

Let Freedom Ring

July 3, 2022

The Fire of Justice

The summer that Scott and I were first dating, we took a weeklong camping trip to a sweet little lake in the Chequamegon National Forest outside of Eagle River. It was an idyllic time, and, I have to say, that camping is a great way to REALLY get to know someone. He learned that even when I'm roughing it, meals are going to be gourmet. I learned, when he refused my help in setting up the tent, that there are some jobs that he is going to insist on doing alone. And together we learned that we have a similar expectation of keeping the campsite neat and orderly.

I'll admit that I was a little apprehensive about being alone together for a week – how would we entertain ourselves for that long? After a couple of days alone off the grid, what would we find to talk about?

Now, while camping was a great way to get to know each other, being the first summer together, we were also still trying to make a good impression on each other. One of the ways that I did this was that I tried not to overpack, which meant, essentially, that I only brought one book. I decided on a classic that somehow I had never read, "To Kill A Mockingbird," and I was engrossed.

The first several days of the trip were such a huge success that Scott actually called in to work to extend the vacation. Wouldn't you know that on the third or fourth day of the camping trip, we were caught in a torrential downpour that hadn't been forecast. We moved the essentials that couldn't get wet into the car and tent, but wouldn't you know, I forgot the book on the picnic table.

If you've ever seen a paperback after it has been left out in the rain, you know that it swelled to three times its original size, and the pages were stuck together and impossible to pry apart. So, one more thing that Scott learned about me on that trip was that, even though I'm highly logical in most things, there are some sacred cows that I won't touch. You see, even though the book was ruined, I refused to let him throw it on the campfire after it dried out. You just can't burn "To Kill A Mockingbird." You just can't.

I'll admit that I don't know whatever happened to the book. It may have ended up in a fire at some later date when I wasn't paying attention, but I just couldn't be party to burning THAT book in particular.

All of this is a silly intro into the theme I've been praying about in light of our scripture readings and tomorrow's Independence Day holiday: how are we called to live our faith in the public sphere? There has been so much discussion, especially in the last couple of weeks, about not imposing our religion on other people. Both the Supreme Court Justices using their faith in the overturn of Roe v. Wade and their determination that it is legal for a coach to gather students in prayer while still on the clock, have unleashed a firestorm of arguments that while it is fine and good for people to have faith, it is contrary to our democracy to impose that faith on others.

On the flip side, at the core of the Christian tradition is the transformation of society. How do we hold that tension? How do we transform the world with God's love while not imposing Christian values on everyone?

Scriptures

Our scriptures today give us some insight. In the passage from 2 Kings that Larry read for us today, we hear the story of Naaman, an army commander who had leprosy. Naaman is told that there is a prophet in Samaria who can cure his leprosy, and so with the king's blessing and resources, Naaman finds himself in front of the Prophet Elisha who tells him to wash in the Jordan River and he will be healed. Naaman then throws a tantrum.

There's a ton of analysis that can be done around what the tantrum is about: Is it centered in racism, because he can't allow himself to believe that the Jordan would have healing properties that the bodies of water in his homeland do not? Is his tantrum centered in ego and pride, that the prophet's instructions are so simple? I can imagine him thinking, "Really, you don't think that I've thought of washing to try to get rid of this?"

But the dynamic that I'd like to lift up in light of our question of how do we transform society with our faith while not imposing it on others is HOW the prophet creates change. You'll notice that Elisha does not force change, does not impose healing, but rather invites Naaman into being healed. Elisha doesn't make Naaman wash, but rather shares with him the means of healing, and then it is up to Naaman to choose to access that grace.

Similarly in our Gospel passage today, Jesus sends out seventy of his disciples to prepare the way for him. As he sends them out, he tells them that if a town is welcoming and hospitable to them, to stay with them, but if they are not welcoming, to simply shake the dust off their sandals and move on. Much like the dynamic I lifted up from our reading from 2 Kings, we see an offer of a relationship with God, but not an imposition of it.

In both instances, whether a town receives Jesus' emissaries or not, the message he tells them to share is the same: the kingdom of God has come near. The kingdom of God has come near. It is within your grasp. If you are willing to receive it, the freedom of God can be yours. AND, if you're not open to receiving it, it is going to walk on past.

Conclusion

So much of what is passing right now as transforming the world with one's faith is about limiting and control and imposition. Folks are saying, "These are the things that I value, things I find to be important, the ways I think God works, and I think they should be central in your life, too." But if we look at the overall themes of both the Old and New Testaments, what we find is a God for whom liberation and freedom are core. From liberating the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to liberating Jesus' followers from oppressive Sabbath laws that limited access to healthcare because of a misguided understanding of the law, the overarching trajectory of the Bible is God guiding people toward an ever-expanding experience of freedom.

Freedom is why we ask couples when they marry, “Do you take this person to be your lawfully wedded spouse?” I mean, obviously they do, or they wouldn’t be there. But still, we ask, because the freedom of choice is absolutely central to a covenant being valid.

Freedom is why our church works as a direct democracy, with each adult member getting a vote in major church decisions. In many instances, it would be easier to have a Bishop or some such leader impose expectations upon us, but we understand that God has endowed each one of us with wisdom, and the freedom to exercise that is critical to living an adult faith.

Friends, tomorrow our country will celebrate Independence Day. We will celebrate freedom. Many will wrap themselves in the flag. We will rally around the constitution which proclaims:

“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity...”

The thing is, in order to form a more perfect Union, we need to be constantly striving toward freedom for ALL, liberty for all, justice for all. In her book “Keep Moving,” poet Maggie Smith writes, “Do not stop at the wall looming before you. Make a door. Make a door wide enough not only for you, but for others. Keep moving.”

And that’s the thing: just as we have received freedom and liberation in Christ, so, too, it is then our responsibility to be agents of others’ liberation. I’ve heard from a lot of you recently that you feel there’s a wall that has been put up in front of you. My prayer this week is that with your faith as your guide, you will make a door, a door wide enough not only for you but for others. Then, not only will we celebrate your freedom, our society will be transformed by the freedom of God’s love.

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