

“Freedom and Other Burdens”

John 18:33-38; Romans 7:15-25a – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might embrace your liberation with the grace and wisdom to share it with others. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Wow. Paul is really on the struggle bus here! There are hints throughout the epistles that Paul may have had an ongoing physical condition that often put him at odds with his body; this is one possible explanation for the sharp dichotomy he expresses between spirit and flesh. Arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, a bone broken early in his life that didn't heal right – it could have been a lot of things. Or maybe he was just prone to migraines or got lots of toothaches, and had the misfortune to live in a time before pain meds existed.

On the other hand, maybe Paul was just a night owl living in a morning bird-dominated culture, and this whole passage was inspired by his struggle to get out of bed in the morning. We just don't have enough information to know what Paul's struggles were – why his flesh seemed so hostile to his good intent, and what form of sinning it was that tempted him. But I imagine this was his goal. Though this passage seems very personal, Paul knew he wasn't the only one with this kind of debate raging within his soul. He didn't specify the struggle because he wanted the Romans (and us) to be able to see our own struggles in his description.

Paul, of course, was coming at this problem from a distinctly first-century, Pharisaic Jewish perspective. Following the Law had shaped who he was and his understanding of sin. Much of the book of Romans is taken up with Paul's wrestling with what it would mean to follow a faith that was set free from the Law. Partially because he was the apostle to the Gentiles and did not see how it made sense to require them to submit to Jewish law before becoming Christian. But also, for his own sake: were there parts of the law he would leave behind? Breaking bread with Gentiles was already taking him into dangerous territory, and he needed to find ways to make sense of that.

Despite the vast cultural differences between that transitional era for Paul and early Christianity and our current circumstances as Christians who are citizens of an endangered democracy, there are some strong connections between the struggles of his soul and ours. It turns out that navigating freedom isn't the walk in the park it might seem like at first. If someone or something is constantly telling you what to do and how to do it, you might not love doing it, but at least you know what to do. When you are at liberty to live as you see fit, there are a lot more unanswered questions, and as Paul notes, conflicting desires. When we come together as church, at least within a Disciples context, we are all free to do as we see fit. But if we're committed to church, we agree to conduct ourselves in ways that are good for the community. We do things we might not really want to do, because they will help the

community thrive. We refrain from doing things we may wish to do because they would not promote the community's health. Or at least, we try. No one is compelled to be here or to behave a certain way once here; rather each of us constrains ourselves appropriately so that we can effectively function as a community of faith. It's a free choice to put boundaries on our own freedom. This is the inverse or the mirror image of Paul's insistence that it's sin within him wanting to do the bad things. When we constrict our own freedom for the good of the community, that is our faith, our commitment to the community that is helping us not give in to our selfish desires or preferences. All of us doing this on a regular basis, with the aid of the Holy Spirit, is what makes church possible. But nobody is claiming that it's never a struggle! Freedom is not without its complications.

Laying that aside for a moment, let's take a look at our other scripture lesson. The reading from Romans was from the lectionary for today, but I sought out this brief excerpt of John's passion story because it brings our struggles with freedom into a broader context we need to tend to. "My kingdom is not from this world," Jesus tells Pilate. Given the drama with which this declaration is made, it's remarkable how many generations of Christians seem to have assumed it had nothing to do with how they tried to follow Jesus. Centuries of empire appropriating the trappings of faith while decimating indigenous populations and forcing baptism upon them. Crusades, missions, residential schools where children were violently punished for speaking their

native languages, even slavery – all declared holy and righteous, in the name of a Lord who very clearly wanted nothing to do with earthly power and domination. It's completely nonsensical, and yet, the weight of it upon our history is still shaping the fate of the church.

This weekend, as we find ourselves at an anniversary milestone as a nation, struggling again to determine just what sort of freedom we're celebrating and for whom, we need to be clear about what it means that Christ's kingdom isn't from this world. If it were, Jesus told Pilate, his followers would have been fighting. But it isn't, and they weren't. Until somehow, they forgot what he said and became of this world and began fighting. This brief interchange between Jesus and Pilate shows us an important truth: the faith of Jesus isn't one that can be compelled; it does not enforce itself through violence or any other means of manipulation. This is an essential part of the nature of following Jesus. It is a choice you make for yourself – over and over again, as Paul attests. It is not something you coerce anyone else into. How could it be? If we struggle to follow Jesus within our own souls as much as Paul describes, how could we possibly try to force it upon anyone else?

This is precisely why we must stand against the Christian Nationalism that is running roughshod through our government at the moment. Yes, for the sake of pluralistic democracy. But even more so, for the sake of the gospel. Violence is being done to the faith of Jesus Christ – every time a Cabinet department holds a service,

pressuring all their employees to attend and listen to the narrowly defined understandings of faith and patriotism that are espoused by the selected speakers¹; every time verses of scripture are tacked onto memes promoting imperial violence attacking God's people in places all around the world; every time rhetoric is deployed implying that American and White and Christian are three words meaning the same thing, excluding anyone who doesn't fit or doesn't agree as less than worthy. Christian Nationalism is heresy, and our freedom calls us to say so out loud. The religion of Jesus cannot be a movement that compels obedience or silence or uniformity. The religion of Jesus does not force itself upon anyone. The religion of Jesus invites us all freely into a freedom where we submit to our own constraints because we're following the law of love.

This is not an easy freedom; it is not a freedom that releases us from responsibility. Rather it liberates us to follow the God of the Incarnation, the Creator God who made and is making this beautiful world full of vast diversity, inviting each of us to follow the law of love in the particular ways that fit who we are as individuals. It liberates us to participate in democracy and citizenship, shaped by the compassion and generosity and humility of Jesus. This is a freedom worth celebrating! Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord! Hallelujah and Amen!

¹ Excellent coverage of Cabinet worship services can be found at www.wordandway.org, in the "A Public Witness" column by Brian Kaylor.