



Proper 9 / A 5 July 2020

Living in Perfect Freedom

Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-15; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

From the prophet Zechariah, we hear these words echoing across the centuries: *Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope; today I declare that I will restore to you double.*

The apostle Paul, openly confesses to the early Christians in Rome: *I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

And in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens . . .*

We hear these readings on a day when many of us are still engaged in celebrating Independence Day, the uniquely American holiday that honors the many freedoms and liberties associated with our founding fathers' brilliance and vision in creating, and courage and strength in signing the Declaration of Independence. While this year, with the many restrictions and prohibitions in place, our celebrations may feel a bit different than past years' festivities, this mid-summer holiday still conjures up images of flags and patriotic bunting, picnics, pool parties, parades, fireworks, and concerts with the Boston Pops or on the National Mall.

Even though our country is made up of a diverse mixture of people, nationalities, cultures, and languages – perhaps our greatest strength - these readings and this July 4th holiday challenge all of us to step away from the barbeque for a while in order to engage in pondering and achieving a deeper understanding of our power and strength as a united community; and ultimately, challenging us to a complete surrender to our dependence on God. We are challenged to question where our true loyalties lie, but more importantly, we are challenged to honestly acknowledge both the great strengths and opportunities the United States offers, and at the same time, honestly recognize the challenges and inequalities that still exist and prevent the great utopian vision of our patriotic ancestors from being realized in its fullness. When we can maturely acknowledge both the positives and negatives, we can understand that evil and sin sometimes comes from our inaction and complicity, as surely as good often comes from our deliberate actions and decisive deeds. On this holiday weekend that highlights the gifts and responsibilities that accompany our national freedoms, we might say that we are also being challenged by the Church to free ourselves from the sinfulness of the world, to proclaim that we are not only US citizens, but also citizens of a higher kingdom, God's Kingdom, and to declare our lives on this Independence Day to be ultimately dependent not on our democratic society or government

or nation, but solely on our Creator and Savior for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

How often have we felt like Paul in his letter to the Romans? No matter how hard we try to live according to the Great Commandments - to love God, and love our neighbor as we love ourselves - it often doesn't turn out that way.

This is not because we are horrid, wretched creatures, but because there is sin in the world and in our lives. And sin is powerful. Sin is anything and everything that stands between and prevents our complete union with our God. It is so powerful that sometimes we give in and just recoil from difficult decisions, walk away from tough actions and words. Finding everything we know we should do to be just too hard, we may be inclined to withdraw, just stand back and allow whatever is happening to happen, convincing ourselves that it is all beyond our control or influence. In such moments, our inaction and complicit silence becomes the sin - the greater sin! - especially when we know that an injustice is being done, causing suffering, inequality, injustice, and separation between people and our God.

In his letter to the early Church in Rome, Paul is not as upbeat and optimistic as usual. Instead, he sounds, quite frankly, exhausted and defeated; and in his desperation he seems unable to do any more to free himself from sin. His words suggest that sin is always present, constantly looking for a weak moment to pounce, lurking like a monster under the bed, just waiting to take us over.

Even in the Gospel reading, Jesus reminds the crowd gathered around him that some thought John the Baptist was possessed with a demon, simply because he lived a life of piety and faithfulness, denial and simplicity. And Jesus overturned injustices and unveiled the many ways that society's attitudes and laws actually reflected sinfulness rather

than loving God and loving neighbors. He pointed out that sin could come from twisting the law and the truth, misrepresenting even the best of intentions, resulting in a reduction or denial of others' God-given humanity, and sometimes, even loss of life.

Jesus does not tell us that it is an easy task to be free of sin and follow him. In fact, as we have heard in the Gospel readings of the past several weeks, there is always a cost: fear, distrust, anxiety, rejection. The cost may even come from the places where we place our greatest trust and pledge our greatest loyalties – family and friends. That is why it is so often hard to understand just what sin is and discern when it is present, and often just as hard to know what and where true and unconditional love is as well.

Even when our motives are on target, sin can be strong enough to intervene, interrupt, and destroy. And yet, sin cannot exist when we abide in Christ and Christ's Spirit abides in us. When we transfer our loyalty from the material, social and political powers and influences of the world to the infinite love of God, we find ourselves experiencing the passionate expressions of love that we read about in today's Old Testament reading and psalm. We are filled with a sense of hope and joy, blessing and abundance.

In these readings, we learn that the answers to our deepest questions are often found in the unexpected, and with those surprises come both peace and joy. Paul's cry of desperation is only calmed when he acknowledges that sin is defeated by God through our life in and with Jesus as our companion. And no words, no matter how profound, can really describe love so that we or another can understand. We must experience love to know love. We must experience God's grace and mercy and compassion to know all that God can give us. We must bind ourselves in obedience to Christ to know perfect freedom in Christ.

These readings both challenge and comfort us. They point to the profound simplicity and ecstasy of a life in Christ, and they serve as a mirror for us to examine our understanding of who we are, along with how we are living our life. Simply put, as people of faith, our most urgent desire is to love God, and to love our neighbor. When we do not love God and our neighbor, we are in sin; when we do live in love with God and neighbor, sin is defeated.

Jesus gives us these reassuring words: *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*

Zechariah prophesies: *Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious . . . and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, . . . to the ends of the earth.*

Paul's sadness and desperation is replaced with sheer and total joy: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

On this holiday weekend devoted to freedom and liberty, let us celebrate both the liberties we enjoy in this great nation and the perfect freedom from sin we enjoy through Christ. Let us come to God through Jesus. Let us take on the yoke of discipleship. Let us learn from Our Risen and Ascended Lord. Let us, like him, be gentle and humble in heart, for then we will be at peace with all our sisters and brothers whom God has made. And that, my friends, is nothing other than complete and perfect freedom.

Amen.