

Fifth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): “Yes, You’re Freed **From**, But What Are You Freed **For**?”

Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

July 1-2, 2023

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Are there things that bother you, and you would like to see put right, but you think, “That’s not my responsibility! It’s somebody else’s job!” Or: “I didn’t create this mess, and I’m sure not going to clean it up!” “I don’t **have** to, so I’m not **going** to, by gum.”

I used to feel that way about litter around town. I love Manasquan and am proud of our beautiful neighborhood. So especially on holiday weekends when we have lots of visitors and not everybody knows the location of strategically placed trash bins, and some folks throw their garbage on the ground or throw a can out the window of their car, I get a little salty. I think of all those posters I saw growing up: “Don’t be a litter bug! Be a wise owl!” And I think, didn’t the person who dropped their coffee cup or MacDonald’s wrapper on the ground **go** to grammar school? Don’t they **mind** being a litter bug?? Do they really **want** the plastic wrap they left behind to end up in the ocean??

Then at some point the Holy Spirit helped me see I am **free** to pick up litter I haven’t dropped. I tried it on my morning walks and it makes me feel **good**, knowing that there are a couple more aluminum cans or glass bottles going to recycling instead of blighting someone’s lawn or clogging the storm drain. It used to be enough that I did my small part by not littering. Now I do my small part by picking up after others. And it feels great.

Even with no one else noticing. Or caring. But the other morning someone **did** notice. I had Bear’s leash in one hand and with the other I’d just picked up a soda can from the gutter on South St. I heard a car coming behind us slow down. It was really early and no one else was around, so that gave me a little pause. The driver stopped the car, rolled

down the window and said, “Thank you. Thank you for doing that.” Then he drove away. He saw and named a silent “gift given,” and in doing that he gave **me** a gift.

On this weekend leading up to the 4th, my point is that there is true **freedom** and **goodness** in doing what is **right** that is not **required**. The fomenters of the American Revolution **fought** to **free** themselves **from** a **far-off** king who taxed them unfairly. They sought freedom **from** tyranny. They wanted to rule themselves. We see the outcome of their uprising as a very good thing for us, almost 250 years later. But in this weekend’s reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that we are only **truly** free if we are obedient, loyal, loving subjects of another King, the Most High God.

Paul was brilliant, inspired, insightful, but sometimes his letters read like he’s writing to a class of seminarians. I graduated from seminary and sometimes **I** read what he wrote and I think, “What??” “Huh??” “Could you dumb that down a little for me?” So I asked that this weekend we hear a simpler version of what Paul wrote in the 6th chapter of Romans, taken from Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. It’s not a dumbing down, but a contemporary take on what Paul wrote close to 2,000 years ago, about the freedom that is ours through Holy Baptism, our watery dying with Christ and rising to new life.

Sin can’t tell you how to live. After all, you’re not living under the old tyranny any longer. You’re living in the freedom of God. (Romans 6:14)

We can choose to do **more** than the law requires. I am free to pick up litter left by somebody else, and I am even free to pick up after someone else’s pet. No one can force me to spend my energy on anyone else, but I am free to give my time away. No one can force me to spend a dime on others, but I am free to give my money away. No one can force me to do more than the bare minimum, but I am free to go the extra mile. I live in the exquisite freedom of a child of God.

Human nature hasn't changed over 2,000 years. It's still true what Paul says, that *"there are some acts of so-called freedom that destroy freedom."* (Romans 6:16) In spiritual lingo, we talk about sin. In sociological terms we might talk of libertarianism. "The government can't tell me what to do!" But "no man is an island, entire unto itself," as John Donne wrote. If being an American means being self-serving, solely self-centered, unwilling to be a compassionate, caring, contributing member of a community, that is **not** a good thing, and that is not the kind of "freedom" our forefathers and foremothers fought for. Being freed **from** something is a good start, but liberation needs to progress beyond throwing off the yoke to being freed **for** something beyond ourselves, and for Christians, that is being freed **for** God's purposes. We're not "free agents." Jesus says, *"Take my yoke upon you, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you'll find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28). If we wear Jesus' yoke, we are governed by Him. I'm not free to follow just any random path; I **choose** to go where He leads.

This leads us back to last weekend's confession that no one wants to be known as the holy roller in a group ☺. In today's reading Paul observes:

.... the more you did just what you felt like doing – not caring about others, not caring about God – the worse your life became and the less freedom you had... And how much more different is it now as you live in God's freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness?

Here's the question I have for all of you: what's the difference between being a holy roller and being holy??

- In my book, a holy roller is someone who comes off as holier-than-thou. Judgy. Looking down from some great height on mere, sinful mortals.
- Someone who is holy, though, is living in God's light, shining with the light of Christ, taking seriously Teresa of Avila's advice that we should be the serving hands, the loving heart, the compassionate eyes, the tireless feet of Christ in this world.

Picking up litter is not the world's best example of living a holy life ☺. What examples can **you** think of, examples of everyday holiness, within **our** reach?

A holy life is a life yoked to Christ, a life of faith-active-in-love, mirroring St. Paul's simple statement: *"I live no longer for myself... but for Him who loved me and gave Himself for me."* (Galatians 2:20) He urged Christians to think about how they lived **before** coming to know Christ, before waking up spiritually, before taking their faith seriously:

[Did] you call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Nothing you're proud of now. Where did it get you? A dead end.

*But now that you've found you don't have to listen to sin tell you what to do, and have discovered the delight of listening to God telling you, what a surprise! A whole, healed, put-together life right now, with more and more of life on the way! Work hard for sin your whole life and your pension is death. But God's gift is **real life**, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master.*

(Romans 6:21-23)

Our personal Independence Day was the day of our baptism. Some folks have another occasion they mark and celebrate, too, like the day they entered recovery. Mark those special days on your calendar, in addition to the 4th of July. Celebrate your freedom **from** the tyranny of sin and obsession with self, and/or the tyranny of addiction. Celebrate your freedom **for** living a life of faith-active-in-love, freedom to choose being yoked to Christ, an obedient, loyal, loving subject of another King, the Most High God. Amen

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