

Problem: What does freedom mean in our living out our faith?

-This weekend we are marking the important holiday of Memorial Day, a day in which we remember all of those who have died in service to our country. It's a time when I remember my grandfather's stories of young boys who were sent off to war and who never returned home. As I was preparing for this sermon, I came across an online advertisement which read: "We will never forget the sacrifice of those preserving freedom and making our country the best in the world. Freedom is not free. Happy Memorial Day."

-This got me thinking a lot about more about days like Memorial Day. We see a lot of the word "freedom" on national holidays such as this and I sometimes I have a hard time figuring out what it means. What is freedom in the context of our faith? Is this freedom the same kind of freedom that is mentioned in Memorial Day Ads?

-Is freedom something that is "not free" as the Memorial Day Ad suggests or is it something different?

Solution: Freedom through Christ means two things:1) acting out the promise of Christ and 2) being freed to see Christ's promise in ways we don't expect.

-Many Christian theologians talk about freedom in various ways. Our own Martin Luther addressed this topic many times in the context of the Reformation. One famous Luther quote, where he highlights what freedom means for Christians in his typical paradoxical fashion, goes: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

-Through the promise of Jesus Christ we are free and subject to none, yet we are also servant subject to all. How does this make any sense?

-Perhaps one of the best examples of this "freedom" that Luther is talking about is the Centurion in our gospel story today. Here is a man who seemed to have complete freedom. As a Roman officer, he was in charge of a group of soldiers with orders from the occupying power to "keep the peace". In other words, he was the eyes and ears of Rome and had the freedom to do whatever he needed to do in order to keep a rebellion in the village from happening. He was what we would view as the "enemy" keeping a tight grip on the movement and freedom of the locals in Capernaum.

-It was common for Centurion officers to form relationships with the higher-up leaders of Jewish locals and do favors in order to win them over in a strategic way for them to keep power over the locals. Thus, building a synagogue for the village could be seen just as one more pragmatic strategy than anything else.

-This should make us very suspicious when approaching this text. Let's remember this context and history of the Roman occupying power over Israel as it was on the mind of Luke, our gospel writer, from the beginning.

-But there are a couple things that stick out to me in how this Centurion lives out freedom. The first one is how he regarded his slave. In verse 2, our translation says the

Centurion “valued this slave highly”. Another translation of this word could be read as “to hold in honor or in a state of intense personal respect.” Some bible scholars read this story as the Centurion wanting healing for this slave like someone wanting their car fixed. Healing means this slave can get back to work. I think, however, that the Greek points to a very different conclusion. I think this story is showing how the Centurion is deeply grieved for this slave, and is using his freedom to put the slave above himself by radically calling out to Jesus for help.

-Interestingly, if you are a bible geek like me and you enjoy reading more of the context of this story, you will discover that this story immediately comes after Jesus gives his “Sermon on the Mount”, or “Sermon on the Plain” as it is called in the gospel of Luke. Jesus says at the conclusion of his sermon: “The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of the evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”(6:45) Is it the case that the Centurion, an officer of an occupying empire who has probably killed or jailed resisting Jews in the streets, who serves an empire that rules by fear, is the one who is teaching us the abundance of the heart? Is it the case that this Centurion is the one who is teaching us real freedom?

-Freedom then, I think, is shown in this text not only by being freed to put others before ourselves, as we can see lived out by the Centurion, but is also being freed to see Christ’s promise in new ways: in ways that don’t make sense a lot of the time or that we won’t expect.

- It’s not the Jews, not the disciples, not anyone else who is living out Christ’s freedom in this story but the Centurion. “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith,” says Jesus.

Implication: It is through our freedom in Christ that we can truly build meaningful relationships with others.

-Freedom to put others before yourself and freedom to see God in new ways. This is the kind of freedom that our faith in Jesus Christ speaks to. But here is the other important part which we tend to miss, especially in our hyper-individualist culture. It’s only in community where this freedom can be truly lived out.

-Environmental writer, Naomi Klein tells the story of women farmers who have successful rice growing farms in the south of India. A power company fast tracked a proposal to build a coal fired power plant on their land: creating huge challenges for the local food system and their community’s livelihoods. These women formed a coalition that defeated this multi-million dollar proposal. It was stopped not just because the women farmers “made a lot of noise”, but because they had effectively formed deep relationships in the community who stood up for them.

-Would the Centurion have been able to live this freedom out had he not built prophetic relationships in the community first? “He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people” (v. 4-5)

-The Gospel of John talks a lot about the Holy Spirit and calls it the ADVOCATE. Well, in a lot of ways, we can see this lived out as the Centurion is the ADVOCATE for the slave and the community is the ADVOCATE for the Centurion. If freedom means freedom for the other and seeing Christ in new ways, in what ways is our church called to ADVOCATE this?

-Our Community Mapping effort, where a dedicated group of church members went out and did 30 interviews within our Bonner/Milltown/Clinton/Turah area has produced a lot of information and has begun to be noticed. Our church’s action, in fact, has spurred on conversation by people in the Bonner Community Council, Bonner Development Group, and the Bonner School to come together and start recrafting a community smart-growth plan: a plan that would stipulate a common vision for this area’s future. This community would not even be thinking about this if it were not for the effort of this church. That’s what I think advocating a freedom in Christ means. It means seeing freedom in each other as a community, not as an individual.

-The freedom that is advocated by Christ need not be preserved like the Memorial Day advertisement suggests, but advocated. Freedom in Christ is not based on sacrifice and defending, but on sharing and the living of faith.

-May we be able to find this freedom and live it out in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.