

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the fifth Sunday after Pentecost 2020: "Real freedom"

So fairly recently I was listening to the radio in my car, and I heard two news pieces back to back. I really have to wonder if the newscaster herself caught the irony of this.

The first piece came from Michigan. It detailed the rather significant protest movement against, and in defiance of, Governor Gretchen Whitmer's shelter-in-place order given in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Large protest marches and gatherings were described, and the individuals interviewed railed against the governor and her perceived assaults on their individual and economic liberties.

The second piece then came from northern Italy. There, a loose conglomeration of private citizens and businesses are seeking to hold public officials in two of the cities that were hit hardest by the pandemic liable in both civil and criminal court for their failure to shut public life down soon enough to stem the spread of the pandemic.

*To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'*

In this moment of poetic license, Jesus takes a jab at a society that is impossible to please. If the children play the flute, they're

not taking things seriously enough. If they wail, they're taking things too seriously.

Jesus then goes on to describe the reception that the New Testament's most prominent prophet, John the Baptist, gets followed by the reception that he, God incarnate, gets from exactly the same people.

John was an ascetic. He lived out in the desert by the Dead Sea, wore camel's hair, ate nothing but locusts and wild honey, and kept dunking people in the Jordan River to wash away sins. Obviously the guy has a demon.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a party boy. He was happy to eat festival meals and drink wine. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes for heaven's sake! Obviously the guy is a glutton and a drunkard and shouldn't be taken seriously at all.

We are apparently utterly impossible to satisfy. When we need leaders to make impossibly difficult decisions during a global pandemic, we are then going to rail against them no matter what decisions they make. When we're in a moment of utter desperation, looking for a Messiah who can lead us to freedom, we're going to instantly disqualify any potential candidate because he's too this or too that.

So what's the good news here? Or, as St. Paul so poignantly put it in his letter to the Romans, who will deliver us from this body of death?

The good news is that the freedom and peace we so intensely desire come to us when we start looking where they can actually be found.

If you're looking for a freedom and peace that the world can give you, I'm afraid I have nothing but bad news for you. We're in the middle of a pandemic, and no matter how well it is handled, it's going to leave us with unanswered questions and unhealed wounds. We're in the midst of a moment of reckoning around historic and current inequities across many lines, especially lines of race, and no matter how well we engage this moment, we're going to emerge from it with some problems still unsolved and some injustices still lingering. One of the most hotly contested elections in modern history looms just four months away, and no matter how it turns out, it's not going to be perfect.

If, however, you're looking for a completely different kind of freedom and peace, the kind that wells up from someplace deep within you, electrifies your body and your mind, and then radiates outward from you onto everyone and everything you encounter, then I have much better news for you. I know someone who can give you that.

I don't believe for a second that Jesus made his snarky remark about the generation in which he found himself just to take a dig at them. I believe he was simply pointing out the futility of trying to find satisfaction in the things of the outer world. It's no accident that right after this remark he moves into one of the most famous statements of comfort in the Gospels:

*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.*

When we take the yoke of Christ upon us, when we allow ourselves to be spiritually bound to him, he takes all other burdens off our backs. We are free once and for all!

It's so perfect that this message is coming to us as we celebrate Independence Day. The ideals of our nation are indeed a beautiful thing to celebrate: a place where all are equal and all are sovereign. But when we expect perfection in that system, when we expect it to satisfy our desires for a sense of freedom and peace of mind, we find ourselves forever disappointed. Real freedom and real satisfaction are something that Christ alone can deliver to us. The success of this great experiment we call the United States of America is an outpouring of that, not the cause of it. I believe it is because we as a people have lost sight of that fundamental truth that we find ourselves in a moment of such bitter division right now.

Real freedom comes from the Christ within, not the world outside. It's probably never been more important than it is right now to be clear on that point and to turn all of our energies toward seeking that kind of freedom rather than any other.

I say that because we've never had a moment where the outward structures on which we ordinarily lean have been stripped so bare. We're not gathering in church. We're not allowed to share

Communion. We're not seeing many friends or extended family. We're not even supposed to share hugs or handshakes.

This creates a hard, but not impossible, landscape in which to do what we need to do. We are communal creatures, and we find Christ and live Christ in community. But...even that is something from the outside, and thus, while it's wonderful, we can have the freedom, the peace, and the satisfaction that Christ promises even without it.

You don't need to wait for anyone or anything to take upon you the very light burden that is Christ and then watch as he takes off of your back every other burden that you've ever carried. You can do that this very instant. Try, even in this moment of quarantine, looking in the mirror and seeing what's really there. The Spirit of Christ is already in you! If you are feeling anxious, confined, unsatisfied, your Liberator is right there in your body, your mind, and your heart, working a divine plan to set you free! It may happen on a timeline and according to a pathway different from what you might have anticipated, but if you allow it, it will surely happen.

We don't need to be like the generation of which Jesus spoke in today's Gospel, always searching for satisfaction from the outside and never finding it. We can instead be the generation that is satisfied and free, because we know where to find it: within our very selves.

I would wish you a happy Independence Day my friends, but that would be redundant. Because in Christ, every day is Independence Day. May you enjoy it fully.