

6.29.2025 Pentecost 3

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1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

“For freedom Christ has set us free”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

A blessed Fourth of July week to you. Today’s reading from Galatians about freedom in Christ reminds us that the freedom we have in Jesus Christ is the greatest freedom we can know. As Paul writes, “*For freedom Christ has set us free,*” freeing us from sin and allowing each of us to freely “*love your neighbor as yourself.*” Today’s readings focus upon freedom to follow Jesus on our human journey. We might simply call today’s theme: “Discipleship.”

Admittedly, today’s gospel isn’t easy for modern readers. We are told Jesus “*Set his face to go to Jerusalem.*” These arcane sounding words express Jesus’ total commitment to the work God had set before him, not looking back, nor allowing anything to distract him from the goal of the cross. On his journey Jesus taught his followers about discipleship, about following him and bearing his cross.

Luke tells us that Jesus sent the disciples ahead of him so that people might have an opportunity to know him. In reaching out to different people, we see Jesus’ concern for all people, even extending the hand of friendship to those who were considered enemies.

One of the bedeviling problems of reading scripture as modern people is how to hear words of encouragement in these ancient texts. For example, when the Samaritan village did not receive Jesus, his disciples reacted as many in today’s world react when rejected – they lash out. In asking for permission to command fire to come down from heaven, these two disciples were essentially saying, “Let us bomb them with fire and destroy them.”

Considering today’s ongoing problems between nations, I find this story of Jesus’ tolerant reaction to potential enemies very encouraging. Jesus restrained his disciples from violent action, instead simply leaving an open offer friendship. Something to think about.

Some of you may know the well-known story about Abraham Lincoln, who, when questioned by someone about not being harsher toward the Confederacy in defeat, Lincoln replied, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” Jesus’ rebuke of his disciples’ demand for a harsh response, reminds us that Jesus sends the disciples into the world to meet others with friendship. Like them, we too, are to be “ambassadors of Christ,” tolerant of others in moments of rejection and conflict, always praying for enemies, while working for peace and friendship.

The second part of today’s gospel about three “would-be” followers of Jesus is perhaps even more confounding to modern readers. In these stories Jesus appears uncaring, even tone-deaf to the needs of people and their families.

The first would-be follower says to Jesus, “*I will follow you wherever you go.*” Jesus’ response,

*“the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head,”* is essentially asking us to count the cost of discipleship, that to be a disciple is not a part-time vocation. To follow Jesus is the lifetime journey of carrying the cross and loving others wherever you go.

Wherever you have gone your journey, perhaps Jesus has helped you make decisions leading to a new job, to a new city, to marry someone you love, to forgive an enemy, to help a neighbor. Such decisions can seem like a fork in the road, and like Jesus, we may find ourselves in new surroundings feeling as if we have no place to lay our head.

To a second would-be follower, Jesus says, *“Follow me.”* In response, this person laid down conditions, saying, “Wait, I need more time to burying my father.” People have long found this answer of Jesus to seem cruel, asking, “Is Jesus against family life?” Absolutely not, rather, Jesus is stressing that being a messenger of God’s kingdom comes first, even before family. Our relationship to Jesus blesses all our other relationships.

A third would-be follower volunteered to conditionally follow Jesus if he could return home to say goodbye. Jesus’ response, *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,”* reminds us that no one ever ploughed a straight line while looking backwards. The same can be said about life: it is difficult to live forward if we are always looking back.

These ancient texts continue to speak to the concerns of modern life. Hatred of enemies causes us to miss opportunities to make friends of enemies. In placing other things ahead of Jesus: family, wealth, nation, work, our insatiable appetites, and our sinful self-centered hearts, we miss out on experiencing liberation from sin and a freedom that encourages us to live for others. Paul says it well in Galatians 5:1, *“For freedom Christ has set you free.”* Christ frees us from our slavery to sin so that we might live with love and forgiveness for our neighbor.

I’ve told this story before, but it encourages me on my journey. It is about a high school friend and his father. At my friend’s parents’ home there was a framed painting of Jesus at the top of the stairs by he and his brother’s bedrooms. At the bottom of the frame, a handwritten note was attached with tape reading, “The Difference.” One day I asked my friend about it, and he said, “Oh, that’s my dad, he put that message on the frame.” I have no doubt that my friend’s father was trying to tell his sons that “Jesus Christ is the difference in your life so that you can make a difference for others.” That small piece of paper reflected the faith of a father who knew the freeing power of Jesus in his own life for he was a surgeon and chief of staff at a large hospital in Chicago who had cared for the lives of many. Jesus is the difference: he gives us grace, love, and forgiveness so that we might embody his love and forgiveness in this world.

Serving as a missionary, I was fortunate to have worked with many gifted people, and I have been thinking of two of them this week. For ten years, I was a member of the board of trustees of a

large Christian university in Tokyo and was blessed to serve alongside many faithful Japanese Christians who, though successful in their own fields of work, used their gifts to advance Christian work in Japan. The first person I have been thinking about served as the Prosecutor-General of Japan, the equivalent of the U.S. Attorney-General. The second person served as president of a large global Japanese securities company. Yet they each volunteered their time and gifts to aid the work of the church – in particular the work of Christian education because they believed in helping raise up the next generation of Christians who might also serve Jesus in their own fields of work.

I share this story because when Jesus says, “*No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,*” Jesus is saying that we are called to be disciples who live out our lives *for God*. Each of you are also examples of following Christ in your own fields of work. How has following Jesus Christ helped you in your life and work? How has Jesus helped set the direction of your life’s work, and how is Jesus continuing to lead you each day among your community, family, and friendships?

Preparing for sermons is interesting because I always remember people and experiences. I remember being given an assignment in high school by a Jesuit father who was my English teacher. We were learning how to compose a business letter, and to make this exercise real, we were to compose a letter to someone we knew (it couldn’t be a parent) with the aim of receiving a response. In the letter, we were to ask a profound question: “How has being a Christian helped you in your work?” To use today’s gospel metaphor, “How has following Christ helped you plow the field in which you work in this world?” I dutifully wrote my letter to a man in my home church who was vice-president of Underwriters Laboratories in Northbrook, Illinois. Of course, I no longer have the man’s response, but I remember he wrote about the faith that guided his life and work.

None of us would be the people we are without the forgiveness of Jesus. None of us would be the people we are without people who have embodied Jesus to us. Jesus has freed you to use your gifts for others. Jesus has walked you in times of challenge so that you might walk with others in theirs.

Jesus Christ sets us free to be ambassadors of Christ. He frees us not to be slaves to our appetites for power, to bomb and destroy our enemies, or to remake the world in our own image; rather, Jesus frees us to offer the hand of friendship that makes friends out of enemies.

*For freedom Christ has set us free.* In a confusing and conflicted world, use your freedom to be a living sign of hope. In a world of hatred and enemies, use your freedom with a love and forgiveness that makes enemies into friends.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Amen.