

Pentecost 6C + June 26, 2016

“Being Set Free”

By Nancy Raabe, Pastor

I have never liked clichés. It’s always better to say things in your own words because that tells us more about who you are. One church-related cliché that really bothers me is “faith journey,” as in, “Where are you on your faith journey?” It makes our life in Christ sound so mundane. So I suggest that we substitute “growth in righteousness.” At what stage are you in your growth in righteousness?

We are alive on earth, so our physical bodies are growing—growing older—and if we are alive in Christ, then our spiritual bodies are growing. I didn’t come up with the phrase “growth in righteousness.” It is from Martin Luther, concerning the parable of the leaven in Luke 13, where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to yeast that a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour until all of it was leavened. “The new leaven,” Luther writes, “is the faith and grace of the Spirit. It does not leaven the whole lump at once but gently, and gradually, we become like this new leaven and eventually, a bread of God. This life, therefore, is not righteousness, but growth in righteousness; not health, but healing; not being, but becoming; not rest, but exercise. We are not yet what we shall be, but we are growing toward it. The process is not yet finished, but it is moving on. This is not the end, but it is the road. All does not yet gleam in the glory of God, but all is being purified.”

Our congregation is not yet growing in numbers. But we are growing in righteousness. We are taking hold of what it means to be led by the Holy Spirit instead of

imposing our own ideas. But our spiritual growth can be arrested by forcers that enslave us. Listen again to the beginning of today's reading from Galatians: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

Paul is speaking from experience. Before his conversion he was a slave to his desire to persecute followers of Christ. None of us is this kind of zealot, so we probably don't think of ourselves as living under a yoke of slavery. But we are human, so each of us at some point in our lives has been held captive by things we have done or things we have left undone. We can't forgive ourselves, so we keep replaying the endless loop of self-condemnation. Take a moment to locate deep in your soul something that has held you back in this way. [Pause]

Here's one that I thought of. In my mother's later years, I did not make enough of an effort to bring my children along when I visited her. We've always lived a long plane ride away from Southern California. I would typically visit three or four times a year, and when the kids were younger it was easy to bring them too. But as they got older I let their various activities and commitments take precedence. I told my mother they were too busy to get away for 3 or 4 days. The result was that in my mother's last years she hardly saw them.

When I was remembering this a few days ago, a familiar wave of remorse began to wash over me. It was tempting to give in to it and berate myself as I'd done in the past: How could I have been so thoughtless?

It's human nature be controlled by cycles of guilt and shame. It is SO easy to give in to these feelings, which drag us down. We can't forgive ourselves, so we turn away

from God and turn in toward ourselves—a classic definition of sin. What happens over time is that, in this condition, the Christ-centered aspects of who we are—the compassionate part, the loving part, the relational part, the forgiving part—shut down. This is what it means to be in bondage to sin. We are immobilized by the chains of guilt and shame, jealousy and vindictiveness, that become tightly wrapped around us. How can we ever break free?

The first step is to admit that we can't do it on our own. Remember that sentence in our old Brief Order of Confession and Forgiveness (LBW)? "We confess that we are in bondage to sin....*and cannot free ourselves.*" We can't do it on our own. We need God's help. So we wrench our attention away from ourselves, turn to God, and confess to what is keeping us locked up. Then we plead for God's mercy—that we be forgiven and welcomed back into God's arms even though we know we don't deserve to be. This is the definition of grace--undeserved mercy. God forgives us no matter what, loves us more than we can possibly imagine, and has loved us from the moment of conception. Remember that beautiful line in Psalm 139? "It was you, God, who formed my innermost parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb."

Why did God create us? I believe God desires, through Christ, to be in relationship with us. God showers us with love and we return it to God in greater measure through acts of love and mercy on toward our neighbor. What did Jesus tell the lawyer at the end of the parable of the Good Samaritan? "Go and do likewise."

So the key that cracks open the padlock and frees us from our captivity is forgiveness. We can forgive ourselves once we grasp that God has already forgiven us.

Not to do so would, in a way, be denying God! Now we can return to that first line of Galatians 5: “For freedom Christ has set us free.” We are free! Free to love fully and live fully.

But this isn’t the end of the story, because we are on a journey of growth in righteousness. So Paul goes on to say: “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

In our Gospel reading for today we find out what it means to “stand firm.” Those who follow Jesus must commit themselves totally to discipleship. At this point in Luke 9 Jesus is starting out on the long journey that will eventually take him to Jerusalem. For those who would become disciples, as many want to do, there is no looking back. Here is a poor person who is denied the simply wish to say goodbye to his family. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,” Jesus says in response.

It is time for us to boldly put our hands to the plow, as individuals and as the body of Christ here at 901 Harrison Ave. What do you see ahead? What furrows will we be turning over and what shall we plant in them? Let’s grow in righteousness together, as the body of Christ, and experience what it’s like to be free, truly free, to love and to be loved.

Amen.