

Westminster Sermon – Called to Freedom

Scripture Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Last week our first scripture reading in First Kings introduced us to Elijah, who served as prophet to the Northern Kingdom in the 9th century Before the Common Era. Elijah was empowered to “let go” of his paralyzing fear when he confronted God, not in the wind, in the earthquake or in the fire, rather Elijah meets God in the still, small voice within and accepts anew God’s summon to follow and to speak truth to power.

In today’s reading from Second Kings, Elijah’s mission is complete; he is preparing to meet his Maker and to pass the mantle of God’s spirit and leadership to Elisha. In this time of change, we see parallels in the transition of leadership from Moses to Joshua. Some of us may remember the story of Elijah ascending on a chariot and whirlwind into heaven. This mysterious and miraculous dying does not override the sense of loss on the part of those who have known and loved Elijah. Yet, God remains faithful in times of change to raise up new leaders. The importance of Elijah’s leadership in our faith tradition is signified by his presence with Moses and Jesus in the Transfiguration. Hear now what the Spirit is saying to each of us.

1 Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 2 Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me as far as Bethel." But Elisha said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 6 Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; for the Lord has sent me to the Jordan." But he said, "As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you." So the two of them went on. 7 Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 8 Then Elijah took his mantle and rolled it up, and struck the water; the water was parted to the one side and to the other, until the two of them crossed on dry ground. 9 When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me what I may do for you, before I am taken from you." Elisha said, "Please let me inherit a double share of your spirit." 10 He responded, "You have asked a hard thing; yet, if you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be granted you; if not, it will not." 11 As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven. 12 Elisha kept watching and crying out, "Father, father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" But when he could no longer see him, he grasped his own clothes and tore them in two pieces. 13 He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 14 He took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, saying, "Where is the Lord, the God of Elijah?" When he had struck the water, the water was parted to the one side and to the other, and Elisha went over. Amen.

Turning to the New Testament for our second scripture reading we pass through time almost as mysteriously and miraculously as Elijah being taken into heaven. The mantle of God’s Spirit continues to be alive and well through the words of the Apostle Paul who writes to those who have been welcomed into the family of God through their faith in Jesus Christ in the first century of the Common Era. As Moses freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to serve Yahweh, Jesus frees us from sin to serve one another... a metaphor especially meaningful in the context of our abolitionist roots. In Galatians 6, Paul articulates the paradox of the freedom in Christ to which we have been called. Hear now the Word of God.

1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

13 For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. **14** For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **15** If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. **16** Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. **17** For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. **18** But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. **19** Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, **20** idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, **21** envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. **22** By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, **23** gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. **24** And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **25** If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The sermon title: "Called to Freedom"

The text: "For freedom Christ has set us free." Galatians 6:1a

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, thank you for the generosity of your spirit, which you give to those who follow you; and thank you for your faithfulness to us during times of change and growth. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

The Spirit is alive and well and was present in Portland, Oregon this past week as the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) gathered for the 222nd General Assembly to worship, to share in fellowship and to attend to the business before us. On the 60th anniversary of women's ordination to the ministry of the Word and Sacrament, and the 85th anniversary of ordaining its first woman elder, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) made history again, electing two women as co-moderators for the first time: The Reverend Denise Anderson, a pastor from National Capital Presbytery, and The Reverend Dr. Jan Edmiston, a presbytery executive from Chicago, were overwhelmingly elected Co-Moderators. The mantle of leadership was passed from Moderator Elder Heath Rada who served since 2014.

A new Stated Clerk was also elected and outgoing Stated Clerk, the Reverend Gradye Parsons, was honored for his resilient leadership since 2008. The Reverend J. Herbert Nelson was overwhelmingly elected Stated Clerk in an historic vote, becoming the first African-American elected as the top ecclesial officer of the nation's largest Reformed body, a largely white denomination. Reverend Herbert is a third generation Presbyterian pastor.

With over 9,500 congregations, the PC(USA)'s current membership is almost 1.6 million. In 2015, 187 congregations and 95,000 members chose to leave our denomination based on decisions made regarding inclusion in leadership and marriage. We anticipate that these wise and timely mandates for inclusion will lead to future growth. In the same year, local mission giving increased by \$7.7 million and contributions to the work of the PC(USA) by individual congregations increased by \$9.6 million. Likewise, capital and building funds increased by \$11 million. (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, June 20, 2016) Although Reverend Parsons did not leave us on a chariot in a whirlwind, he did hold up a reminder of who we are with these words.

“The PC(USA) clearly isn’t going away, even though some congregations have discerned another denominational path for themselves. Mission and ministry remain vibrant in the body... Presbyterians, regardless of how large or small they are in number, are recommitting themselves to be the hands and feet of Christ in communities across the country.”

It was a joy and privilege to be a small part of this great cloud of witnesses in Portland and to celebrate with brothers and sisters in Christ “the hope in our calling;” a calling which the Apostle Paul reminds us is a call to freedom.

As we prepare to celebrate the independence of our country next week, it is good to reflect on what “freedom” means to those who follow Christ. Unlike contemporary connotations which understand freedom to be autonomy, independence, and sovereignty, in other words “to do as I please,” Paul has something else in mind.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Freedom in Christ does not empower us to do whatever we want without regard for the other or to become self-indulgent, aimless, lacking in self-control. The freedom Christ calls us to, paradoxically, liberates us to serve one another. In serving one another, we become the children of God.

Dr. Mary Pipher, a family therapist in Lincoln, Nebraska, sheds light on our society from her professional point of view. The certainty, uniformity and smugness of the 1950’s are gone. This is a good thing, however what has replaced these is an uncertainty that is often masked by an over confidence or narcissism and a self-absorption. The irony is that in a time of so much personal self-doubt, it is all about me! And in a time of so much personal freedom, people are trapped in lives which lack meaning and direction.

The problem today is not throwing off stifling constraint; the problem is our lack of shared guidelines to organize our lives and to provide the limits and boundaries which paradoxically offer freedom. As parents, we worry about our children’s feelings. We want them to feel good about themselves; however society’s emphasis on self-esteem often overlooks the importance of behavior and character...the fruit of the Spirit which Paul describes as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Some may say we want our children to be happy more than we want them to be good. Dr. Pipher contends that happiness ultimately comes from a sense that one is contributing to the well-being of the community. In other words, people feel good about themselves when they do the right thing!

In Dr. Pipher’s most recent book *Seeking Peace*, she talks about the importance of her grandmother in forming her character as a little girl. Not long before her grandmother died, Mary asked: “Are you happy?” To which her grandmother replied, “Mary, this is not the right question to ask me. Instead, ask me, have I made good use of my time and my talent? Is the world a better place because of my presence?”

Mary Pipher’s grandmother reminds us that Christ’s call to freedom reaches beyond ourselves. It is not all about me! Rather, the call to freedom in Christ is living a life of integrity and character within community. The call to freedom in Christ is a life of service, accountability, kindness and self-control. The call to freedom in Christ is knowing who we are and to whom we belong. By the liberating grace of God, may we each join in the chorus. May we sing because we are happy. May we sing because we are free. Amen.