Westminster Sermon – The Paradox of Freedom
Scripture Readings: 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14 and Galatians 5:1, 13-25
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In today's scripture reading, 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Elijah 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. 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.

Now when the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. 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. (pause) ***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. Fifty men of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. 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. 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." 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." 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. 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. He picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. 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 scripture reading, Galatians 5, 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 5, 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. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 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. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "The Paradox of Freedom"

The text: For freedom Christ has set us free. Galatians 5:1

Let us pray. We are grateful, dear God, for the gift of your generous spirit and the paradox of our freedom in Christ. And now, may the words of my mouth and meditations of each of our hearts by acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Since we began the Steadfast Neighbor Service Week in 2020, it has been our practice to give awards to the ministry partners at the end of the week. On Friday, I received the "It Won't Be the Same Without You" Award, yet one more reminder that my time as your pastor is nearing an end. I shall miss you and the privilege of leading you more than you know.

It seems like yesterday we were painting the white picket fence at the corner of Walnut and Edwards, which we repainted this year. That white picket fence is a metaphor for being good neighbors and respecting boundaries. Some of us remember worshiping outside on Westminster's front lawn in 2020 during the pandemic across the street from that white picket fence as we dedicated the Steadfast Neighbor Endeavor. I shared a picture poem our son Paul wrote in the fifth grad, The photo, taken when he was a toddler, is of Peter and his dad at our Clayton home doing a high five in front of our white picket fence and the gate they successfully installed to protect our adventurous son from wondering into a busy street, with grandfather's flagpole in the background. Paul wrote this to describe the picture.

A white picket fence stands sturdy,
My father and grandfather rejoice!
My mother meets me in the eye from the
sideline of the project,
A flag from my great-grandfather blows
in the strong wind,
My fence is held by a sturdy hinge...
this picture reminds me,
this picture reminds me,
of the four generations,
the flag, my grandfather, my father,
and the white picket fence that stood so sturdy.

Today we rejoice as we meet one another's eyes from the sideline of this year's service week projects because we trust Westminster will stand sturdy within this beautiful neighborhood to proclaim, with the psalmist, God's steadfast love and faithfulness to all generations… and that for generations to come, members and neighbors will work side by side across sturdy picket fences to create healthy boundaries with respect and affection.

Our prayer, with the Apostle Paul, is that we never grow weary of doing what is right, that we work for the good of all whenever we have the opportunity, and that we do not use our freedom in Christ as an opportunity for self-indulgence. Our prayer is that for generations to come, we will answer the call from the One whose steadfast love holds life and the world together, the call to be faithful and steadfast in loving our neighbors as we love ourselves.

The white picket fence at our Clayton home was also a metaphor for the limits we are called to set because children's creativity does not grow and thrive in chaos but in order, in the safety of

a structured environment. The white picket fence is a reminder that setting limits paradoxically offers freedom. So in these times of limitless opportunity, let us not forget the importance of setting limits and creating boundaries and order in our lives.

As we prepare to celebrate the boundaries so well stated in the Declaration of Independence this Fourth of July, 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. 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 call to freedom in Christ is living a life of integrity and character within community. The freedom Christ calls us to, paradoxically, liberates us to serve one another. In serving one another, we find joy as children of God.

Surprised by Joy is the title of C.S. Lewis' autobiography and the story of his conversion to Christianity. Joy is a reference to grace and to his beloved wife, Joy, who died shortly after they were married, breaking his heart. C.S. Lewis is a prolific English author of the twentieth century. His writings *Mere Christianity*, *The Great Divorce*, *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Chronicles of Narnia* have inspired children and adults alike to capture the mystery of faith and the love of God. The book, *Surprised by Joy,* unlike most, is especially personal. He shares how his early formative years shaped his faith and understanding of God. The joy for which he longed as a child, he found unexpectedly amid the bittersweetness of life and in the arms of a God who embraced that life in Jesus Christ.

Each of us, when we take the time to reflect, remembers experiences in our formative years that have shaped our faith today. The first time I consciously remember making a commitment to God was the summer of my eleventh year at a church camp. Interestingly, what I remember most about that experience is a song we learned and sang during the week. "Joy Is Like the Rain" was written by Miriam Therese Winter, a Medical Mission Sister who today is a Professor of Liturgy, Worship and Spirituality at Hartford Theological Seminary in Connecticut.

I had forgotten about this simple song until I heard it again at a retreat while serving my first congregation and again on a medical mission in the Dominican Republic. To my surprise it brought back powerful feelings. It was one of those songs my sister and I would sing together in the car on summer road trips with our parents. I am certain we didn't understand the meaning of the words then as I am sure that even today, we cannot fully appreciate what it meant for Sister Miriam when she wrote it.

There is something about this song that touches my experience. The metaphor of joy being like the rain alludes to the paradox of life when things turn out differently from what we had planned or anticipated, and yet, in those very circumstances we discover an inner peace and insight into ourselves and God.

Truth is often found in what seems self-contradictory or absurd, not unlike the paradox of freedom. We also experience paradox in our life choices. I went into the ministry looking for answers to complicated questions and for certainty to sustain me and discovered that only when I was willing to question the complicated answers of the church and tolerate the uncertainty that is a part of each of our lives would I begin to experience peace. I went into the ministry looking for happiness, somewhat naïvely, and I discovered that only when I was willing to enter with others into their struggle, disappointment and pain, could I also share with them their joy and experience my own. Indeed, joy is like the rain. Amen.