

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 9



8 July 2018

Ezekiel 2:1-5
Psalm 123
2 Corinthians 12:2-10
Mark 6:1-13

I picked up a few thoughts about America for this Independence week. George Will, The Washington Post Journalist says this of the national game, "Football combines the two worst things about America: it is violence punctuated by committee meetings". An American comedian strikes this more optimistic note, "America's a family. We all yell at each other, and it all works out." And, of course, there are always Winston Churchill's double edged words, "Americans can always be trusted to do the right thing, once all other possibilities have been exhausted."

This week of all weeks it seems right to reflect a little on human and Christian freedom. Freedom is many things. Freedom to define one selves as a nation or a country. Freedom to decide on a form of government. Freedom to live as one chooses to live, to believe what one chooses to believe and to practice your religion as you see fit. On a deeper level, freedom is life itself in a sense. We have life only in as much as we have the freedom to choose.

As a Scot, these celebrations inevitably take me back to the forging of Scotland as a nation in the 14th Century. We fought our war of independence that culminated in the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314 where the young King Robert the Bruce led a Scots army to victory over an Army twice their size much better equipped.

John Barbour, Archdeacon of Aberdeen at the time writes in his poem "The Bruce",

*A! Fredome is a noble thing!
Fredome mays man to haiff liking.
Fredome all solace to man giffis,
He levys at es that frely levys!*

Later the brand new Scottish nation wrote a letter to the Pope called 'The Declaration of Arbroath' seeking official recognition. They wrote in very similar terms to those Jefferson used to describe the grievances of the American people against George III. In fact, some hold that Jefferson may have had knowledge of this document through his mentor during his time at William and Mary University, the

Scottish Professor, William Small. After listing those grievances The Declaration of Arbroath says, “It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honors that we are fighting, but for freedom - for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself”. Scotland remained Independent for 400 years before entering into a freely chosen union with its neighbor England. Which only goes to show, it’s never too late to change your minds!

As I was reflecting on these things, the Collect for Peace from Morning Prayer came into my mind.

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: Defend us, thy humble servants, in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

‘Whose service is perfect freedom?’ The idea of service, with its connotations of obedience and the restriction of action by the will or purpose of another seems to sit oddly beside our notions of freedom as independence and autonomy and doing whatever we want. But it’s true isn’t it? Freedom only exists by virtue of the constraints that protect and create it. We are free because we accept limitation, and those limitations are boundaries that actually create the space in which we can be free. We are free as much because of what we say “no” to, as by what we say “yes” to.

Marriage, for instance, creates a space in which a relationship is free to become something completely unique and deeply profound. That freedom is based on the unconditional “yes” the couple say to each other, but also on the ‘no’ they say to the rest of the world and all the other relationships they could have had.

In the same way religious communities are based on a “yes” to God but also on the constraints that say ‘no’ to many aspects of life, including marriage. Those vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are what set them free to go anywhere and to serve God, even in places of difficulty and danger.

Our liturgy is the same. The formality and structure create the space for us to be who we are and to worship in whatever state of heart or mind of life we are in at the time.

Real freedom is not the ability to do whatever you want. It is also much more than just individualism. I am reading a book by David Brooks at the moment called “The Social Animal”. In it he highlights just how influenced by our relationships, cultures, and communities we all are. He says, “Researchers have done a lot of work over the past few years analyzing social networks. It turns out almost everything is contagious. If your friends are obese, you are more likely to be obese. If your friends are happy, you’re more likely to be happy. If your friends smoke, you smoke. If they feel lonely, you feel lonely.” Yet, if that sounds slightly depressing and deterministic, the other side of the coin is that it is those very same communities that influence us; our families, our friends our churches, that make a real and shared freedom possible. We can only be truly free together.

Real freedom is not the ability to do whatever you want. It is also much more than just individualism. I am reading a book by David Brooks at the moment called “The Social Animal”.

In it he highlights just how influenced by our relationships, cultures, and communities we all are. He says, "Researchers have done a lot of work over the past few years analyzing social networks. It turns out almost everything is contagious. If your friends are obese, you are more likely to be obese. If your friends are happy, you're more likely to be happy. If your friends smoke, you smoke. If they feel lonely, you feel lonely." Yet, if that sounds slightly depressing and deterministic, the other side of the coin is that it is those very same communities that influence us; our families, our friends our churches, that make a real and shared freedom possible. We can only be truly free together.

Freedom is not about doing whatever you want or about being free from connection with, or dependence on others. Nor does it mean, as we see St Paul describe so vividly in this morning's Epistle, freedom from suffering. This thorn or, in some translations, a wooden stake that cripples Paul at times has been interpreted in a great many ways, but it may well have been a recurring virulent malarial fever which haunted the coasts of the eastern Mediterranean then as it does today. It produces headache that suffers say is like "a red-hot bar thrust through the forehead" and that, when the affliction becomes acute, it "reaches the extreme point of human endurance." This burden, Paul prays earnestly to God to ask him to remove it, but the Father's response to him is, as it is often to us, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

Paul's famous response to this 'Sufficient Grace' is to say, "Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

Sometimes, I think we Christians misinterpret this and seem almost to say that weakness is itself a good thing. This is not what St Paul is saying at all. He is not saying "Yes, just be weak. It's a good thing!" No, what is good is the strength that we find in Christ to be strong enough to endure the weakness and to live positive and faithful lives despite it. The nasty Army Physical Training Instructors that I remember shouting at exhausted soldiers (and occasionally even more exhausted Padres) are not far from the truth. "Keep going!" they scream, "Pain is just the feeling of weakness leaving your body!" In our weakness God teaches us how his Grace can make us strong enough despite our frailty.

Freedom is then, not the freedom to do anything we want. It is the freedom found in freely chosen limitations. It is not pure individual autonomy either, but rather something that is most fully found within a network of human relationships; a family, a community or a church. It is not freedom from suffering and struggle either, but rather the discovery of a sufficient grace to endure and overcome whatever the thorns we have in our sides. Only those who can live through struggle and weakness can truly be free.

The Church is a family, a society within society, whose freedom is purchased by Christ's blood and by our "yes: to him and our "no" to the works of darkness. The American comedian's words about the American family, "We may yell at each other from time to time, but it all works out", may seem glib or at least wildly optimistic, given the current levels of acrimony and division in society at the moment. The Church is not immune to these divisions either. Jesus himself found that the atmosphere was not right in his home town in this morning's gospel. They sneered at him and he could do very little. Without our "yes" even Christ cannot help us very much.

As the commentator William Barclay says, “There can be no peace-making in the wrong atmosphere. If people have come together to hate, they will hate. If people have come together to refuse to understand, they will misunderstand. If people have come together to see no other point of view but their own, they will see no other. But if people have come together, loving Christ and seeking to love each other, even those who are most widely separated can come together in him.”

So a belated Happy Independence Day! May we find in Christ the service that is perfect freedom and may our “yes” to God be also a “yes” to each other so that it may yet all work out for this remarkable country. And if I may say this as one of the bad guys in this particular story about freedom that we have just celebrated. May God bless the United States of America!

Amen.



CHRIST CHURCH GEORGETOWN

31st and O Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20007 | 202.333.6677
www.christchurchgeorgetown.org
info@christchurchgeorgetown.org

The Rev. Timothy A. R. Cole, Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth F. Keeler, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Elizabeth B. Gardner, Asst. to the Rector
The Rev. Nicholas J. Evancho, Deacon & Seminarian