

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I imagine many of us have been reflecting on the nature of freedom, something the more privileged among us took too much for granted until caught up in the conjunction of the pandemics of COVID-19 and racism. Some of us learned at least the beginning of the Declaration of Independence as schoolchildren: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Because of the era in which I grew up and my race, I believed this to be true and a good reason for the founders of our country to secure their freedom from oppression. It was only later that I learned that this universal declaration was not—in spite of the beauty of their words—intended to apply to everyone. Its promise of lives of safety and happiness for all is long overdue.

Monuments in public places that many of us assumed were built to last forever are toppling down in the midst of a time in which all of us have been living with the freedom of movement many of us took for granted severely curtailed. Some of us are coming too late to the understanding that these freedoms were not and are still not enjoyed equally.

So I have been thinking about issues of inclusion and exclusion in our country and how for most of us, freedom is not absolute but contingent. And in spite of the hard tenor and restrictions of these times, many of us live with new hope for a better future for a greater percentage of our people, precisely because of those like our founding ancestors who are able to say enough is enough. And more recently those who are reminding us that the history of those brought to the shores of Virginia as slaves predates the arrival of those who traveled on the Mayflower.

And as we celebrate an ephemeral, incomplete and only too human freedom that is an attempt to mirror the freedom and covenantal relationships that God intends for us as creatures made in God’s image, I’ve been thinking about those who have lost even the promise of freedom and whose lives are shortened because of the circumstances of their lives and, yes, in some cases by the choices they have made.

It was only once I’d moved to New York State three years ago that I thought to find out the name of the large prison on route 84 I’d passed dozens of times on my trips coming up from New Jersey for more than 20 years. A quick search showed that it is Downstate Correctional Facility, a maximum security prison. What are the stories of the inmates and what would be their prayers? I must confess I still have no idea.

Last week’s statistics from the Federal Bureau of Prisons show that of the 13 categories of offenses for those convicted, 46% are for drugs. I suspect that many of these inmates are addicted themselves or preying on people who are and—for the most egregious of offenders, plotting the addictions of others.

Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me....Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Paul’s strikes me as a particularly insightful statement from scripture that can be applied to understanding addiction today and how it destroys our freedom—even as the concept of addiction itself is something rather modern, less than two centuries old. Addiction is a complex phenomenon, one still questioned by many. Are those suffering from addictions dealing with an illness or dealing with a disease – or both?

Psychiatrist Gerald May, in his classic study *Addiction and Grace*, writes: “All human beings have an inborn desire for God.” It is “our deepest longing and our most precious treasure. It gives us meaning.” But then as we all know “something gets in the way. Not only are we unable to fulfill the commandments; we often even ignore our desire to do so. The longing at the center of our hearts repeatedly disappears from our awareness, and its energy is usurped by forces that are not at all loving.” While May states his belief that major addiction is the “sacred disease of our time,” he also suggests: “the psychological, neurological, and spiritual dynamics of full-fledged addiction are actively at work within every human being. The same processes that are responsible for addiction to alcohol and narcotics are also responsible for addiction to ideas, work, relationships, power, moods, fantasies, and an endless variety of other things....Our addictions are our own worst enemies. They enslave us with chains that are of our own making and yet that, paradoxically, are virtually beyond our control. Addiction also makes idolaters of us all, because it forces us to worship these objects of attachment, thereby preventing us from truly, freely loving God and one another.” And yet, *and yet*, our addictions can lead us to a deep appreciation of grace precisely because they bring us to our knees.

Paul’s words are talking about sin – is it part of himself, is it some sort of alien invader? His letter is remarkable in its honesty, in his willingness to admit his vulnerabilities. Peter Marty, editor of *Christian Century*, writing in an editorial about the opioid crisis wrote: “Self-destructive habits receive much of their lifeblood from daily dishonesties. ‘Ten percent of my battle has to do with alcohol,’ a friend in recovery likes to remind me. ‘The other 90 percent is all about honesty....’ Yet little white lies plague more than the addicted. Small deceptions function like a narcotic in many of us, allowing us to feel nicely respectable to others.”

We are--many of us--people who keep sabotaging ourselves by our inability to focus on God’s love and God’s grace in the midst of all that keeps us from our center in God. We have to thank Paul, who did so much to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for modeling honesty and vulnerability, and for his total reliance upon God’s grace. The same man who writes “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” is the one who affirms to his readers and through them to us: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

May writes: “Understanding will not deliver us from addiction, but it will, I hope, help us appreciate grace. Grace is the most powerful force in the universe. It can transcend repression, addiction, and every other internal or external power that seeks to oppress the freedom of the human heart. Grace is where our hope lies.”

Where does your hope lie? How can you share your hope for you, your family, your church family, and your community during this time of transition for St. Andrew’s, during this pandemic, on this weekend when we think about freedoms enjoyed, denied, and reserved for those of privilege? How will you be honest and also vulnerable with each other in the months ahead to share the deepest needs and desires of your hearts, as well as the deepest disappointments. How will you take action? How will you work together to ensure a safe space in which God’s transforming love and truth may abound?

God’s startling grace and invitation are often beyond our imagining. The state of our world and God’s at times puzzling restraint attests that not all have the strength and freedom to say “yes,” just as Jesus in Matthew’s gospel puzzles at those of his generation and their life-denying behavior. The children, the voiceless ones in their society, here seem more attuned to God’s realm of abundant life than the wise and learned—and we know that applies to our times today. God continues God’s process of revelation to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see and souls receptive to the good news. Jesus offers comfort and rest to the weary, to those carrying heavy burdens—burdens, no doubt, of grief, of doubt, of responsibilities, of illness, of loss and heartbreak, of sin, of addiction, of racism. He offers rest and his companionship and support along the paths of our lives, the trajectories of our vocations in our families and in the world.

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