

1 Peter 2:11-17
The Fresh Air of Freedom
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
7-5-15

This weekend, our nation is celebrating its freedom and independence. But for many right now, life doesn't feel very free. In the last month alone, we were confronted with questions of monumental significance. Questions like what does it mean to worship freely, express oneself and one's heritage freely, what does it mean to be in relationship and love others freely? But isn't it ironic that while we are living in a time of unprecedented opportunities, many of us don't really feel very free?

Freedom and license are not the same thing, and it can be a very difficult thing to admit when we're wrong, when we're trapped, when we're addicted. Freedom brings with it a host of choices, and we hope that if we make the right choices along the way that the destination will be happiness. Only the problem with choosing our course for freedom is that when we are free but still not happy, you only have yourself to blame.

When we were little, we were told what to do by our parents and teachers. We thought they didn't understand us, and that if we could just get free, things would be okay. Then we grew up and left home, only now the burden of maturity is having to take responsibility for how our lives turn out. Now that we're free to do what we want, where we want, when we want, and with whom we want, who can we blame for our problems but ourselves?

This weekend, our nation is throwing a huge party reminding you that you are free. And now that freedom is even more widely offered. So, the pursuit of happiness is yours. Do you feel free? Are you still struggling to get the happiness and the life you want? If you are, then maybe the battle isn't really out there so much as it's in here.

The letter of First Peter tells us that there is a battle being waged against the soul. It's a battle for independence. Because you can have the greatest life, filled with all the money and power and leisure you can cram in there, but unless your soul is free, you will still desire more.

On the flip side, however, once you have found freedom in your soul, it doesn't matter how many opportunities are taken away, how much health you lose, how many commitments you have, you will always be free.

There are two places where Peter tells us the battle for our independence is won or lost, and they both have to do with our perspective. If we can allow God to change our perspective, then we stand a chance of living into Gospel Grace-filled Freedom, God's Declaration of Independence. The first is our perspective on this world. The second is our perspective of ourselves.

Peter begins our passage today by referring to his audience using two interesting words,

he says: **Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles.** Aliens and exiles.

Followers of Christ think of themselves as a community who is not fully at home here. In many ways, we are alien, we aren't too attached to the place where we're staying. We have different customs and different values than the world around us. Followers of Christ are different from the culture around us in that we don't think it is the world's responsibility to make us happy.

It doesn't take long for you to see the dreams of freedom that surround our society. Financial freedom, relational freedom, political freedom, social freedom. But happiness is not something we can pursue and fully find in anything this world has to offer. Freedom is that which wells up from the depths of our soul.

Sometimes we think that the way to freedom is by conquering and subduing the world around me. That if I can be, in the immortal words of George Costanza, "master of my domain," getting a hold on my job, my family, my country, then I will be happy. Jesus invites us to enjoy and appreciate all these things for the good they provide, but also to realize that it is our communion with God our Creator that makes us free. Peter says that we should be able to honor everyone, even the emperor who was persecuting the church at the time he wrote this letter. Honoring someone means no longer trying to change them into something that you need for your ends, because you already have what you need in your Savior.

In Philippians, Paul writes that our citizenship is "in the commonwealth of heaven." Jesus was the freest person who ever lived. He truly believed that only his Father in heaven could provide his identity. Which is exactly what God did at Jesus' baptism when he rolled back the clouds and said, "This is my son, with whom I am well pleased." Jesus says the same thing of you; have you taken those words deep into your heart? For Jesus, that meant that he was free to serve. Jesus was freed from the world to serve the world.

The second field on which we battle for our freedom is our perspective of ourselves. We become free when we commit our lives to serve others. Among the wonderful ironies of the Bible is that the only way to be free is to become a servant of God.

In just a few moments, we will close worship by singing a great hymn, "God of the Ages." It was written by Rev. Daniel Roberts in 1876 to help his little church in Brandon, Vermont, celebrate the centennial of the Declaration of Independence. Pastor Roberts spent his whole ministry serving that small parish as a way of loving God. Shortly before his death, he wrote in his journal, "I remain a country parson, known only within my own small world." And yet, 128 years later, we are still singing Pastor Roberts' hymn, as are churches all over the country. But the servant couldn't see that at the time. He was just faithfully trying to pull together a hymn for another Sunday. He was just free to serve and let the Lord worry about the significance of it all.

God is inviting you into a life of free and unrestrained service and mission. Who knows what the ripple effect of your actions will be. One hundred years from now, there might

be a group who still tells the story of your acts of faithfulness. You are members of a body that has spanned the centuries, and we are a part of its continued unfolding story.

It may be hard to see the significance. “You mean I’m just supposed to raise these kids?” “You mean I’m just supposed to love these people in my office or on my block?” It’s possible that you might even die without knowing the significance of your work. That can either drive you crazy or it can drive you to lay even bolder claim on the fact you were created free—so free that you find your joy in taking responsibility for yourself, and choosing to serve God’s holy and eternal dreams.

This week, *Time* magazine ran an article that began: “What if the only way you can be good is to be great?” What followed was the remarkable story of a man by the name of Nicholas Winton, who died this week at the age of 106. For nearly 50 years, Nicholas quietly went about his life, keeping a harrowing story to himself. It wasn’t until his wife was cleaning out their attic that she discovered a scrapbook filled with pictures and profiles from her husband’s past.

As a young British businessman in 1938, Nicholas realized that there was a host of Jewish children who were marked for extermination. All over the world, people did what most would: they read the story and turned the page. But not Nicholas. He could just turn his head. He singularly arranged for nearly 700 children to be transported by train out of Nazi-occupied Prague, and transported to Britain where he—again single-handedly—arranged for them to be brought in by British families. All of which happened on the eve of Germany’s invasion of Prague.

To achieve this monumental act of heroism, he did not ask for people’s money; what he asked of them was much greater. He asked them to embrace their freedom and risk their comfort to extend that gift to hundreds of children on the brink. The true greatness of liberty is not what you do for yourself, but how you use your freedom to liberate the life of another. Freedom ought to beget freedom.

The final question I think we are invited to ask is, how do I know which dream to serve in this life? And that’s where I believe the Holy Spirit comes to help you with that question. Should I stay at home or go back to work? Should I enjoy my retirement, or dive into a volunteer project that might become like another job? Should I work in the private sector or in the non-profit? These are real-life questions that many of you have already and continue to ask, I know...we’ve talked.

But I wonder if this isn’t one of those things that God shrugs his shoulders and says, “I’m not going to stay up late tonight worried about this choice.” Not to diminish the size, but when we’re following God, our choices are often between two good things. In many of our Kingdom vocational questions, the options are not one good and another bad, but both good—so in a sense, we can’t go wrong.

Living in the freedom of the Holy Spirit opens a multitude of doors. When our sights are set outside ourselves, the options are limitless. But if we are enclosed around our own

little lives, options are few and things quickly become quite claustrophobic.

So live into the Holy Spirit. God has already revealed all that we need to know in the Scriptures; the rest is following the passions and promptings of the Spirit, and exercising your responsibility of freedom. Follow the Spirit's lead and pray for God's guidance and blessings will overflow upon your obedience.

The air is fresh and clear for those who are unbounded by the Spirit. If the Son has set you free, you are free indeed. Now lift your heads and breathe deeply the fragrant aroma of heavenly freedom, taste the sweetness of God's kindness, and feel the textures of his kingdom and say with me: God, what next?