

The Rev. Joel Petruschke
Our Saviour Lutheran Church
Epiphany 5
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Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. Amen.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, it didn't dawn on me until I was preparing the sermon for today.

It didn't dawn on me until I sat down, began reading the gospel lesson, and was praying over the text.

It didn't dawn on me until I was discerning God's Spirit with respect to that which I might preach.

It didn't dawn on me until then, that we might speak of this pandemic...

That we might speak of this outbreak...

That we might speak of these many months as nothing short of a loss of freedom.

PAUSE

Sure, we have heard persons describe this pandemic as unprecedented times.

We have heard persons describe this pandemic as challenging times.

We have heard persons describe this pandemic as trying times.

But, I don't know if I could say that anyone had said to me that the pandemic is nothing short of a loss of freedom.

PAUSE

Yes, we have had to learn to quarantine and to don face masks.

We have had to learn to practice social distancing and to give up gathering in large numbers.

We have had to learn to go without travel, to go without dining out, to go without movie theaters and other entertainment.

We have had to learn to make do without certain grocery store products, we have had get use to empty store shelves.

But even with all those adjustments to our daily lives, it never dawned on me to call what we have been experiencing over the past several months as a loss of freedom.

We talk about wanting to get back to our normal lives.

We talk about wanting to be able to do the things we once enjoyed.

But, I don't think I have heard anyone decry their loss of freedom.

But, I guess that is what some folks have been clamoring about, those who don't want to wear masks, those who don't want to be told they can't gather, those who don't want to quarantine...

Yes, I think I understand the issue better now.

Yes, I think I have a better grasp of what has been happening.

This pandemic has truly been about the loss of freedom.

Disease, illness, sickness, ailment, malady—it just screams the loss of freedom, doesn't it?

Not being able to do what we want.

Not being able to partake of life.

Not being able to enjoy what this good creation has to offer.

Sickness, illness, disease can rob us, can steal from us, and impinge upon our freedom.

And this is true not just at the time of a pandemic.

Ill health, regardless of the circumstances, takes away our freedom.

It is just this truth has been all the more visible during this time of pandemic.

PAUSE

But this pandemic has brought the loss of freedom in another way.

Unemployment, business closures, economic hardship, financial straits—these things, too, scream the loss of freedom.

When we lose our financial security we also lose our sense of freedom.

PAUSE

And then there has been other problems in our society...racial injustice, prejudice, hatred, and bigotry—again, these things result in the loss of freedom.

PAUSE

Yes, sisters and brothers in Christ, when I came to the gospel reading today and I began to ponder what I might preach, the loss of freedom rang out loud and clear.

For what do we see in this text?

Jesus enters the house of Simon and Andrew.

He enters their house along with James and John.

And we discover that Simon's mother-in-law is in bed with a fever.

She is infirm, she is ill, she is sickly and as a result she is bed-ridden.

She is unable to get up.

She is confined to her sickroom.

And she is experiencing an absolute loss of freedom.

She is unable to embrace life, to enjoy life, to go about life.

Her fever has laid her up.

Her fever has robbed her.

Her fever has stolen her freedom.

And she is at the mercy of her disease.

But, not so fast. Not all hope is loss.

For we read in this gospel that the disciples tell Jesus about her.

They tell Jesus about Simon's mother-in-law, and so Jesus goes to her, and the text says that Jesus simply took her by the hand and lifted her up.

Now, the Greek word here is that same as that word which is used of Jesus' resurrection.

In essence, Jesus took her by the hand and raised her up.

Jesus, in effect, freed this woman.

She was burdened by disease, and made to be bedfast, unable to go about her life.

But Jesus then comes on the scene and heals her, raises her up. But, in short, Jesus freed her.

What does Simon's mother-in-law do next?

What does she do now that she has been made well?

What does she do now that she is freed of her bed?

She began to serve Jesus and the disciples.

PAUSE

And, we might be misled to believe, "Well, that is just what a woman would do, right?"

Women serve.

But this is too simple an interpretation.

The word used to describe her service, *diakonos*, is the same Greek word used to describe the angels that served Jesus during the time of his temptation.

So there is something powerful about what it means to serve.

There is something powerful about *diakonos*.

I would say it this way.

We are freed "from" is only half of the meaning of freedom.

To be freed from illness, disease, and sickness...

To be freed from poverty, economic hardship, and financial straits...

To be freed from racial injustice, prejudice, and bigotry...

To be freed "from" that which oppresses us is only half of the meaning of freedom.

The other half is that we are freed "to"...

We are freed to serve.

We are freed to *diakonos*.

And this is the cornerstone of Jesus' mission and ministry.

This is what Jesus is about. He is focused on freeing people.

Indeed, after Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and she is freed to serve again...

After this story of her miraculous healing, we hear that all that were sick and possessed by demons were brought to Jesus.

The whole city was gathered around Jesus' front door.

And Jesus proceeds to heal the sick who were ill with various diseases.

And Jesus proceeds to cast out many demons.

And we don't know if Jesus kept up his ministry of healing and casting out demons...

We don't know if Jesus was curing people of their various forms of oppression...

We don't know if Jesus freed person after person until the wee hours of the morning, but it sure seems that that may have been the case.

It sure seems like that is the case, because the text transitions by simply saying, "In the morning..."

In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to pray.

And when it is discovered that Jesus is not around, Simon and another disciple hunted for Jesus.

When they finally find Jesus, he is told that everyone is looking for him.

And Jesus replies, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also."

And that is what he did. He went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

But what pray tell was the message Jesus proclaimed?

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near?

Perhaps.

Or, maybe it was repent and believe in the good news?

Maybe.

Or was the message connected somehow to the freedom that Jesus was bestowing on the people?

Maybe the message was as basic as "you are free."

This is the message we need to hear, sisters and brothers in Christ.

This is the message we need to experience.

You are free.

This is a similar message our political leaders want to proclaim, are trying to proclaim.

With the rollout of the vaccine, our leaders want to say to us, “You will be free again.”

With the stimulus monies already disbursed, with possibly more money coming, our leaders again want to say to us, “You will be free again.”

In an effort to alleviate the racial divide, to provide greater accountability of those in authority, our leaders want to say to us, “You will be free.”

This is a powerful message, the message of freedom from any kind of oppression.

But again, we have to remember that freedom is not just freedom “from,” it is also a freedom “to” serve.

We, who have been blessed, with good health, with economic security, with other advantages simply because of who we are...

We, who have been blessed, we have a responsibility to see that others are freed from their whatever oppression burdens them.

This is what Jesus did, he continued going from town to town rooting out oppression wherever he found it.

Ultimately, it led Jesus to cross, where Jesus rooted out the powers of sin and death that oppress all people.

Jesus rooted out these enemies, and freed all people.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, put on your Jesus glasses, and look for those places where oppression lingers, and in your freedom, seek to be an agent of liberation for others.

Thanks be to God. Amen.