



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

Freedom Trinity Sunday 5302021

In the name of the beloved, amazing, triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have been thinking a lot about freedom lately. What does it mean to be free? What does it mean to be free to you? Maybe I've been thinking about freedom since my son is just about to get his driver's license. He takes the test next week. And like any soon to be driver, he has told us how excited he is to go and run chores for us. You know, go get the groceries, Mom, and Dad, I'll get takeout for you. It'll be great. But I think we all know why he's excited, because he can't wait to take that car by himself on the open road with his Spotify playlist going, there's no radio for these kids anymore these days, and he's going to go out and go wherever he wants without his parents. That's freedom.

And maybe I'm thinking about freedom because we're about to hit these holidays that remind us about freedom and the cost and the struggle for it. We have Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, but you know what, I've been thinking about freedom because we actually now get to celebrate them this year, maybe in the way that we want to, because of vaccinations and the lifting of restrictions.

I have to tell you, it is so liberating to think that we might be on this side of this trauma killer virus. I feel like we've been driving in a tunnel, like one of those good old Pennsylvania tunnels that has a big old mountain on top of it. And you just keep driving and driving and driving in the dark tunnel. And you're like, where is the end of this stupid mountain? And then you finally see the outdoors and you're like, ah, freedom!

I'm also thinking about freedom because I was reading a book that was depicting quite graphically, what slaves in the 18th and 19th centuries had to face. And we all know slavery is wrong, but I was trying to imagine what it must have felt like to be a slave, to be told what to do with your time at all times, to have no choice where you live and what you do, and have all your work benefit someone else and never yourself or your family, and to live under a constant threat toward your body that harm could happen at any time based on any reason. I just, I think any of us would give anything to be free from such an existence.

And it made me appreciate again, how powerful the desire for freedom is. It was serendipitous to me that my devotion this past Wednesday had to do with freedom. My devotion writer, Kirk Byron Jones, he happens to be an African-American pastor. He had stumbled on a sculpture in Philadelphia, and this massive bronze sculpture at the corner of 16th and Vine, it's in your bulletin as an insert. And for those of you at home, there it is, it was created by Zenos Frudakis and it is entitled Freedom Sculpture. And the sculptor said that even though for him, the feeling of freedom sprang from a particular personal situation, he was conscious that it was a universal desire with almost everyone - the need to escape from some situation, be it an internal struggle or an adversarial circumstance, and to be free from it.

Now, when you look at the sculpture, what do you see? Do you see a man who is progressively wrestling against what keeps him bound? And then he finally breaks free into this amazing expression of pure liberation and breaks out into exuberant depths? Well, my devotion writer saw something else. He saw four vertical tombs, as he put it, and four different people, all straining to break free. And in three of the tombs, the people are in different stages of escape, but the last two is empty and the freed soul has emerged.

And then he noticed that in that fourth tomb on the mold of where the head would have been, there were words inscribed in it. It said, "Stand here." So the devotion writer obeyed, and he stood in the crevice and he could feel the tomb enclose around him. And then he took a step out and the joy euphoria, he felt being freed, and he felt a bond to all four statues and all the humans who were seeking freedom in their own time, in their own space. He recognized the struggle for solidarity and to recognize that he was one of them. And we all recognize it too, because suffering and fear of being entrapped is universal. And the joy of being liberated is universal.

In the book of Romans, Paul says that we Christians have not been given a spirit of slavery, to live in fear, but we've been given the spirit of freedom. We are the children of God and we get to call on God intimately. We get to call Abba, Daddy, Father. And that informally is because we belong to Christ and Christ has overcome all barriers that keep us from calling God our own.

And so we shouldn't act like someone who's not part of the family. We're brought into the fold. We've been given the spirit through adoption. There was a mom who adopted all of her children and she would regularly say to them, I chose you because I love you. God says the same thing to us. I chose you. You were chosen by God, the Father so that you could be a son or daughter in Christ and be given the Spirit of God. So we're not servants or slaves who are living in fear. We are children inheritors of God, everything has been given to us and we are called to live out in that freedom.

Except I want to speak to the fact that so many of us have something in our lives that brings out a spirit of fear. Maybe you're struggling with depression or anxiety. Maybe there's somebody who's causing conflict in your life or your home. Maybe you're experiencing injustice or you've been betrayed. How are you to live freely when you're shackled by your own circumstances?

When I was reading the Gospel of John, that famous passage that we all recognize, we always think about it as being the epitome of telling us how much God loved the world. But I was so struck as I read it, thinking about freedom because I realized that it actually held in it a way to be free in the midst of struggle. You have Jesus telling Nicodemus, we need to be born from above, born again, born a second time, born anew, born of water in the Spirit.

I just always thought, well, he's just talking about baptism. But as I was reflecting on it, I began to wonder, maybe what Jesus is saying to us is that being born again means in order for you to be free in the midst of your circumstances, you have to believe that even though everything looks the same, it has all changed because God is rebirthing in you a new spirit, God is giving you a spirit that will deal with the pain in not the old way that you have, but release you from the shackles and give you a new way of being, a new way of seeing the suffering that you're experiencing, even in the midst of debilitating circumstances. Even if you're imprisoned or enslaved, God is renewing and giving you a new spirit from above.

And can I just tell you, having a new spirit can help you deal with anything - injustice, agony, anger, betrayal, illness, even your own dying. I think this has to be the hardest part of being a Christian - being free, acting free, even though we don't feel it, even though we may be stuck in our own tombs. But I think what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to all of us is yes, you get stuck in a tomb, but then I will give you a new spirit. I will allow you to be born again, born anew, born from above so that you can be free in the circumstances you find yourself.

And what does a spirit that's born again from above look like? Someone who is really important to me shared with me what the recognizable characteristics of a wise soul are. And they all just happen to begin with the letter C, so I riffed on it a little and I'm going to present to you what happens when your spirit is born again from above. And I call it "The C's because God Frees," and there's a bunch of C's. See if you can catch them all.

So when God frees your spirit, first God gives you *calmness*. And after you get that initial trauma of being so overwhelmed, God comes down to you and *calms* your heart, mind, body, and soul. And that *calmness* overcomes all the tumult that you're feeling in your life, and you become less reactive to the difficulties that you're facing.

And that *calmness* allows for you to have *clarity*. And you can start to see God in a different way, and you can start to see the circumstances in a different way. And you bring this kind of new way of seeing and being into the situation. And then you become *curious* and you start to say, what can I change about this? How can I be different in this space? And you become *creative*. And all of a sudden, you start to think and different things emerge and you become generative. And you think of different ideas and you make different ways of being, and all of that makes you feel *connected* to others because they too are experiencing suffering and they too are figuring out ways to manage it.

And then you have *compassion* because of your compassion that what you're going through is so hard, you know that others are going through it too. And brothers and sisters, can I tell you, we're all going through it. Ain't nobody free unless they're free from saying I am suffering and I am free to be me. And as you have that *compassion* that just builds in you, then you start to realize that you can be *confident*. You can be *confident* because God is with you and God is showing you a new way. God is birthing in you something new. And with that *confidence* comes *courage*, *courage* to speak the truth in love, *courage* to act wisely and wholly, no matter your circumstances, the *courage* to love. That's what freedom looks like.

May you let God give you a new spirit and be born again from above. May you then step out of your own tomb with gladness, courage, creativity, and then when Christ frees you from what bounds you, may you dance with joy.

Amen.