



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

JULY 5, 2020
THE FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Interdependence Day Luke 10:8-9, 25-37; Galatians 5:1, 13-26

If Baptists had a motto, it would probably be these words of Paul: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” Baptists and other congregationalists are vibrantly independent. I have often told my Methodist, Episcopalian, and Lutheran colleagues that I could never be a minister in one of their churches because no one ever tells a Baptist what to do! I don’t think I would do very well with a bishop looking over my shoulder.

Freedom. What a wonderful word. Our spiritual story is rooted in the cry for freedom lifted up by the Hebrew people enslaved by their once Egyptian neighbors. You will remember that Moses, speaking on God’s behalf, boldly told Pharaoh, “Let my people go!” (Exodus 5:1) The religious festival of Passover recalls the way in which God led his people to freedom and eventually into the land of promise.

When the prophet Isaiah foretold the coming of the Messiah, he announced, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1), words that Jesus himself repeated in his inaugural sermon in his hometown. Paul reminds us that we have been saved for freedom. Freedom is at the core of our faith.

Yesterday was our nation’s birthday. It was a vastly different celebration than usual without parades, picnics, fireworks and other large gatherings across the country. Nevertheless, it was a day to remember where we started and to think about where we are headed. Our founders claimed their freedom when they announced in the Declaration of Independence that they would no longer be subject to the British crown but would be a free nation in its own right. Such a bold act required an arduous and costly struggle, but in the end, as with the Hebrew people, freedom was gained and we are the beneficiaries.

As people of faith and as citizens of this nation, we value our freedom and have remained vigilant through the years not only to maintain it for ourselves, but to gain freedom for other people as well.

There is an interesting twist to freedom, however. While we gain our independence from someone or something that attempts to control us, we can sustain our freedom only through our interdependence.

The Apostle Paul understood. In his letter to the Galatian believers, he wrote about their freedom from the law which was oppressive to the Jewish people. Jesus had abolished the law, not as a guideline for living, but as a gateway to salvation. Jesus made clear that we are saved by the grace of God not by adherence to the law of Moses. That is why Paul exuberantly stated, "For freedom Christ has set us free!" There was a catch, however, because with freedom comes responsibility. He warned his friends not to allow themselves to become enslaved again by using their freedom as opportunity to oppress other people.

As Christians and as Americans, we sometimes forget the distinction between independence and freedom. Independence means that no one or no thing controls us. Our independence as a nation broke the choke-hold that Britain had on the American colonies. Our independence meant that we could determine our future, create our own government, shape our own laws, and be accountable to ourselves. Our freedom grants us the opportunity to choose our own way, but it does not mean that we are independent of one another. To the contrary, our freedom reveals our interdependence.

This distinction is largely intuitive for people of faith because we are "free in Christ." As believers, we voluntarily yield to Christ in all that we do. We ask God to guide us—often in ways that we would not go otherwise. As Christians, we are also part of a family of faith which includes not only Lakeside but believers the world over. We rely on one another for support, encouragement, correction, and edification so that together we continue to build up the Body of Christ.

It is essential that we recognize how much we depend on one another, not only in our faith, but also as citizens of our community and country. During this pandemic, we have realized how many people are "essential" to our lives. Everyone who works for our city and county provides us with services that we rely on every day. Store owners and employees make it possible for us to obtain the supplies and other items we need on a daily

basis. And how dependent are we on restaurants and the good people who keep us fed? Teachers and school staff found a way to finish the academic year and are working on plans for the fall. Our healthcare workers keep us healthy and care for us when we are not. I could go on and on mentioning the variety of people, including you, who do so much to keep life as normal as possible. We need each other.

In one of his most memorable parables, Jesus highlighted our interdependence. When a Jewish man was robbed and beaten and left for dead, a priest and a Levite happened by at different times. They were fearful that it could be a trap and they would be the victims. Each one had obligations at the temple and needed to be on his way. Neither one could risk being defiled by touching the man in case he had already died. So, independent of one another and the man, each one passed by on the other side.

Then a Samaritan came upon the man and stopped to help. He might have been fearful of a trap as well, but, in case the man truly needed help, it was worth the risk. He knew that under different circumstances, this Jew would never want a Samaritan to help him much less touch him, but there was no one else around and the man was in danger. The Samaritan also had somewhere to go and something to do, but the needs of this man were greater than his own needs and obligations.

Jesus told this story in response to a lawyer who had asked him to define "neighbor" since Jesus had affirmed the Old Testament obligation to love one's neighbor as oneself. The lawyer surely knew he was trapped when Jesus asked, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" When the lawyer answered, "The one who showed him mercy," Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

We realize how much we depend upon one another when life takes a bad turn. When we need help in a critical situation, we don't care who shows up as long as they can do what needs to be done. How sad it is that when everything is going well, we sometimes forget how much we rely on one another. How contrary to the Gospel it is when we insist that our independence means that we do not need our neighbor and they do not need us. What sin when we use our freedom to limit the freedom of another person!

Last Thursday, NPR's *Morning Edition* carried a story that could easily have been told in our community. David Greene interviewed Ernest Skelton and Caroline Brock of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina because of a conversation they had and a friendship they formed.¹

Mr. Skelton is an appliance repairman. He went to Ms. Brock's home on a Saturday morning to make a repair. She was watching the growing tension in Minneapolis resulting from the killing of George Floyd. When Mr. Skelton came in, she wondered how he felt about what was happening and asked him so. Mr. Skelton is black. Ms. Brock is white. She was surprised by his honesty and forthrightness. He told her that he is stopped by police on a regular basis. He spoke about other white clients asking him for credentials before they allow him into their homes and then staying close by while he works. He recounted how job interviews with powerful white men rarely go well. It is worth noting that Mr. Skelton has two degrees and is the owner of his business.

During this interview, Ms. Brock spoke about how important it became that she asked him how he was doing with all that is happening in our country and then listened to him talk about discrimination in a very matter-of-fact way. She had never had such a conversation before and it changed her perspective immediately. Mr. Skelton talked about how important it was to be able to vent his frustration with a white person since it was white people who were treating him with distrust and suspicion. Since that Saturday morning, the pair have become friends and shared their conversation with other people.

To me, their's is a perfect story for this weekend. It is a story of the struggle for freedom that continues as all of us suffer from the results of discrimination and oppression. It is a story of our interdependence. Not only did Ms. Brock need someone to repair an appliance and Mr. Skelton needed the work, but they each need the other to better understand what is happening in our country. They need one another to find their way to a better sense of trust and respect. And they need one another as friends. The wonderful thing is that they live in a country where they have the freedom to do those things.

What is happening in our nation is heartbreaking and frightening. The coronavirus is bad enough, but some people have decided that they have the

¹David Greene, "How A Black Repairman's Conversation With His White Client Touched The Nation," *NPR's Morning Edition* (July 2, 202); available online at: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/886487235>.

freedom to do as they please regardless of how it affects other people. As a result, infections and deaths are increasing at a tragic rate. That is not being a neighbor according to Jesus. Our nation is a wonderful conglomeration of people of all races and ethnicities, cultures and religions, but some people have decided that they have the freedom to treat some people as less than equal at best and less than human at worst. That is not being a neighbor according to Jesus.

"For freedom Christ has set us free," rejoiced Paul. And he added, "do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." The slavery of which he spoke is sin, the sin of using our freedom to limit the freedom of another person, another child of God.

When we begin to think that our skin color, our language, our origin, or even our religion makes us superior or inferior to other people, we fail to recognize the creative genius of God in making the world a far more interesting place than if we were all the same. That is shameful. When we fail to recognize another person as a child of God, that is blasphemous. When we take the time and make the effort to get to know one another and learn to appreciate one another, that is the community of God come alive. That is true freedom!

We were created to need each other just as we were created to need God. We are dependent on one another and we can never truly be free until we are all free. For freedom we have been saved! Thanks be to God! Let us live freely and interdependent as God intended. Amen.

July 5, 2020

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Almighty and everlasting God, we come to offer our thanks and praise for the blessings that are ours in this great land. Our hearts are filled with gratitude for the freedom to work, to learn, to speak, to worship. We thank you for men and women who sacrifice so much to secure liberty for us and for peoples around the world. Even as we celebrate and enjoy these good gifts you have offered, our hearts are also heavy because of the challenges facing our nation and world. We have mourned with members of our church family through the grief of losing loved ones and the fear of medical crises. We have watched in horror as images of senseless violence fill our television screens, political tensions mount, and people around the globe suffer because of poverty and disease; and we have confronted our own fears and uncertainties in light of our neighbors' suffering.

But still we come to worship, O God. Even when we cannot gather in one place, we seek the strength and comfort that joining our hearts in worship will bring. We seek your presence because you bless our doubts and call us to trust in spite of them. We seek your guidance to put aside our hostilities and suspicions of one another and to follow your way of peace. We seek you because, despite our anxieties and uncertainty, we are a people filled with resurrection hope and an awareness of your steadfast love. Every need we have we entrust to you, and for every gift we have been given, we offer to you our thanks, O God.

Were it not for our faith, the challenges which confront us might be enough to lead us to despair, Gracious God. Instead you have called us to respond with generous hearts, with open minds, and with diligent hands, believing that our life of faith will make a difference in our lives and in our world. Help us to reach out to those who are suffering to offer comfort and hope to meet whatever needs they face. Grant us wisdom and courage to confront the challenges of our world and to seek solutions with humility and mercy. Give us grace to view our differences as a beautiful reflection of your image within each of us and as a call to offer acceptance and to seek understanding. Help us to be a people who demand justice and extend compassion, especially to the most vulnerable among us. As we prepare to gather around your table, hear now, O Lord, these prayers of our hearts and those offered by your children of every language and nation, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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