

“Freedom in Christ”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Romans 8: 1-11

On this Fourth of July weekend, we will have cookouts, visit family and friends, enjoy fireworks, and most of us will enjoy a day off of work tomorrow. It is also a time each year when we celebrate our freedom as Americans. We enjoy the freedom to speak without fear of censorship. We enjoy the freedom to worship without fear of being incarcerated. We enjoy these and so many other freedoms due to the foundations upon which our country was built, and the sacrifices men and women have made on our behalf over the last two hundred years.

I have a greater appreciation for the freedom to worship after my trip to India last year. While one part of our trip was to a more religiously diverse area of the country, the other part of our trip was not. As Christians, we were very much a minority, to the point that we had to be very cautious about how we spoke for our reasons for being there. You don’t always realize the freedoms you enjoy at home until you visit somewhere else that does not have those freedoms.

But when Paul talks about freedom, it’s not as citizens of a country. For Paul, this is a freedom from condemnation and death as children of a living God. And it is a freedom which is guaranteed through one man’s sacrifice: Jesus Christ our Lord.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (8:1-2). That is the radical good news in which we can trust and upon which we can build our lives of faith. When we recognize that our sinfulness does not condemn us because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, then we are freed to live to our fullest potential as children of God.

Blair Pogue writes: *Jesus and his teachings are not a helpful additive, like the protein powder in a fruit smoothie at Jamba Juice. Rather, through Jesus the Messiah, God decisively breaks through everything that separates us from God and makes it possible to live the life God intends for us. It is a life lived in right relationship with God, others, and the whole of creation. Through Jesus’ resurrection, God is able to triumph over sin and death and provide a cosmic solution to the central problem of the human condition, separation from God and others, or sin.*

Paul contrasts flesh and Spirit, not body and spirit. It is not our bodies that are the problem, but whom or what our bodies serve. “Flesh” could be described as the fallen human condition, our focus on the self rather than on God. It is rebellion against God, idolatry or worship of things that are not God. “Flesh” also includes what Paul describes in Romans 7, our inability to “do the right thing” or what we want to do. As Paul puts it, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15). Money, financial security, youth, health, work, good looks, busyness, and technology are just a few of the things we worship instead of God (*Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 231-233*).

It is easy to get side-tracked, to give-in to “the very things we hate.” It is easy to focus inward, to forget that the freedom we’ve been given is meant to serve not to please. It is easy to

forget the tremendous gift we have been given through the Spirit of the living God. And yet, we are called not to do what is easy, but to live in the fullness of the freedom God has secured for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). This freedom is nearly unbelievable, but not completely unbelievable. It is the freedom given to us to go beyond our limitations. It is the freedom of being part of God’s movement with the world that transcends our locale and our lifetime. This freedom does not transport us out of our bodies into a netherworld beyond the pearly gates. Instead it frees us to live fully in this world, in this mortal body we have. This freedom is ours in Christ. It is the result of the power of God, a power greater than the sum of all the powers (ibid, 234).

What does it look like to serve the Spirit and not the flesh? What does it mean to be free from all our limitations, and be a disciple of Jesus Christ?

A family emigrates to the United States, seeking asylum from the persecution they have experienced in their native Africa. They are brought to a new city, with a language which is unfamiliar and cultural practices which are completely foreign. They are nervous, scared, and feeling lost.

A local church partners with this family, seeking to alleviate their anxiety. Members of the church help to get the children registered for school, sign-up the parents for English classes, and seek to provide some of their housing needs in their small apartment. The family starts making inroads, but it’s far from a smooth road.

And then a crisis occurs. An incident takes place which requires the authorities’ involvement, and the family is in disarray. What matters is not what occurred, but how disruptive this becomes for the family. One of the boys is an orphan who this family had brought with them, and now he is faced with being separated from the family. Another boy is in “the system” and is in need of positive, disciplined influence.

Instead of turning away and figuring someone else will deal with this issue, a couple from that church makes a different choice. They take in the orphan, and with the support of their three adult children begin the process of adopting the boy as their own son. And they go to court hearing after court hearing, seeking to speak up for the other boy, until the judge senses their determination and caring spirit. He is released into their custody, and they begin the process of nurturing and influencing him in a positive manner.

This couple could have easily thought first of themselves – of all that they have going on in their lives – and simply said, “I wish I could do something.” And yet they felt a tug, a nudge to do something different – and that only came from the freedom they have received through the Spirit of Christ. I am overwhelmed each day by the ability of these faithful disciples to live fully in the freedom Christ has bought for us.

For those disciples are Bill and Kim Grant, the same Kim Grant who is your church secretary. And I am reminded every day that the freedom we have been given in Christ is not something to keep to ourselves, but is something which allows us to serve God and neighbor in compassion, love, and sacrifice.

“But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.”

Thanks be to God for the gift of freedom in Christ. Amen.