

“Freedom in Christ”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
July 5, 2020

Romans 8: 1-11

Normally, I would say that on this Fourth of July weekend, we will have cookouts, visit family and friends, enjoy fireworks, and most of us will enjoy an extra day off from work. But this year is not like any other Independence Day Weekend, is it? Indianapolis didn't have their large fireworks display last night. Many of us are not travelling to family or friends like we usually would, out of concern for gathering in large groups. And to top it off – there are three races happening at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway this weekend – with no fans present. I can honestly say I never thought I would say that sentence as a pastor in Speedway, Indiana! But that is what our new normal is like during the coronavirus pandemic.

And while we have felt less free to move or live during this pandemic, this date on the calendar is nevertheless a time to 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-forty-four years to ensure those freedoms for all in this country.

I have a greater appreciation for the freedom to worship after I visited India several years ago. 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 answered if someone asked what our reasons were for being there. You don't always realize the freedoms you enjoy at home until you visit somewhere different that does not enjoy those same 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. 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*).

I imagine these last few months have caused all of us to rethink what we place at the center of our lives. It's hard to spend our money on trips and vacations when we're not able to travel in the midst of a pandemic. It's hard to enjoy our favorite meals out in restaurants when we're not allowed to dine inside. It's hard to think about that next exciting thing in life when we've lost our job or our loved one is in the hospital. It's hard to go about our daily lives when we have to worry if we'll be treated unfairly or unjustly because of the color of our skin.

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 others not to please ourselves. 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.

David Greenhaw writes: *To be "in Christ" is to be swept up in the power of the Spirit and be free from what has bound us, limited us, tied us. To be "in Christ" is not the result of something we do; it is something God does for us. Paul does not exhort the reader to get his or her act together and get "in Christ." Instead, he announces, he boldly proclaims, "But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you" (8:9). This proclamation is the good news.*

It is difficult to believe this good news, but it is not impossible to believe it. To believe it is to reorient one's life toward a power greater than oneself. Even more, it is to have one's life reoriented by a power greater than any power we know in this world. Perhaps the greatest

power we know in this world is the power of death, which ultimately conquers all of us and everyone we know. Death's power is not simply at the moment of our dying; it is a power that creeps into our lives, our communities, and our bodies long before the moment we breathe our last . . .

In the concluding lines of this portion of Romans, Paul proclaims that the Spirit "will give life to your mortal bodies" (8:11). By this Paul could mean that our bodies can get the air they need, the coursing blood required to keep them going, even the food and water to nourish them. Undoubtedly Paul means at least this; but there is most likely something more expressed here. Giving life to our mortal bodies is not simply giving them the essentials of bodily functions. It is to bring to our bodies, bound as they are to time and space, a power that is able to connect them to a movement of God's Spirit that is greater than ourselves . . .

"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, 232-234).

Who knows what this church was doing ten years ago this weekend? On July 4, 2010, we dedicated this sanctuary with our first worship service. I know – it's hard to believe it's been ten years. But two weeks ago, when the Session decided to resume in-person worship today, it was Jeff Roberts who said how fitting this date would be noting this ten-year anniversary. And Jeff, as you recuperate at home from your surgery ten days ago, we are grateful for all you did as a part of the Building Task Force to make this space a reality.

As we made all the preparations for coming back for in-person worship today, I have to admit I felt a lot of similarities to ten years ago. Back then, we were coordinating a worship service that began in the fellowship hall, then moved to the new sanctuary, and included lots of moving parts. We had just the bare-bones of the organ installed to help lead singing, and there were lots of unknowns as we began using a brand new space. The space may be ten years old today, but this is the first time we're using it in this way: everyone wearing a mask, people sitting every-other pew with six feet in-between us, and a tech crew twice the size as normal making sure our service is available for those who are at home. Thankfully, the flexibility we designed into this space allows us to be the church we are called to be today, ten years after this space was built.

But this space represents more than just what pleases us as a community of faith. I have said it over and over and over again, and I will say it until the day I die: this space represents our calling to this community, an intentional choice we made more than a decade ago to love and care for our neighbors in this neighborhood. We could have picked up and moved closer to our members – we had the freedom to make that choice which would have likely pleased many people and been more comfortable. But 83% of people in 2009 said, “No – this is where God has called us to serve, to love, to care, to be an Open. Caring. Community.”

Someone recently asked me, “What is the church’s purpose and calling in the midst of this pandemic and our country’s wrestling with social and racial unrest?” I answered, “Now more than ever, the church is called to share hope.” Through the freedom from condemnation we have inherited in Christ, we are called to acts of hope for the voiceless, the impoverished, the marginalized of our world. As a people of faith, we are not meant to sit in fear and isolation, but to allow the Spirit of God to move us beyond our limitations so that hope might permeate the darkest corners of our world. This space is not a refuge from the world; it is a beacon of hope to our community that we have been and will always be here to walk alongside you as children of the living, loving God.

“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 we have received in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.