"What Does Freedom Look Like?"
+ 5 Pentecost +
July 1, 2007

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen. The texts for this morning’s message are the lessons for this day.

It was about 35 years ago right here in the Twin Cities that I attended a preaching workshop led by the Rev. Dr. Billy Graham in conjunction with the Twin Cities Crusade. A group of Evangelism callers from my home church in Milwaukee had come up here to experience the crusade and learn from others about sharing the faith. We went to the Crusade each night and afterward would go to Dinkytown to a tavern that had free popcorn to munch on as we drank our beer and discussed the events of the day before going back to our hotel. It’s very Lutheran to discuss theology over a couple of beers after hearing a good sermon…Lutherans have been doing it for centuries. “All things in moderation” as St. Paul said.

I have always remembered the essence of what Dr. Graham had to say about preaching as it matched up quite well with what my homiletics professor at seminary, Dr. Dale Meier, former Lutheran Hour Speaker, had to say, “Preach the Word – and preach your week.” Dig into the text and see how it relates to your world, your people, their lives – your life.

Well, at first glance my week and today’s scriptures are quite an odd pairing: I left our Vacation Bible School to go and bury my Uncle Herb in Racine, WI. Then, without really making the connection to the lessons to come for this weekend I preached in the funeral message about Paul’s words from our Epistle lesson – the “Fruits of the Spirit,” as I spoke what I hope were words of comfort and inspiration to my Uncle’s children, their families, my Mom, the only sibling left of twelve, my Aunt Ingrid, dozens of cousins and family friends.

So, maybe I’d better address Jesus’ words about leaving the dead to bury the dead first off this morning – lest you scold me for leaving VBS (which went really well, by the way). As is often true in translation work what seems to be forthright and clear usually has a completely different meaning. When the man in our Gospel asked Jesus if he could go home and bury his father he wasn’t talking about a corpse that needed to go into the ground with a meal to plan afterwards– interments happened very quickly when someone died in a Jewish community – within hours. What he’s really saying to Jesus is, “Let me go take care of my father until he’s dead and I’ve gotten my inheritance. Then I’ll know where I stand financially etc. and I can follow you wherever you want me to.”

What Jesus says in response sounds so harsh - “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God,” which is really saying – your father’s
time is in my hands and it will be taken care of what is most important now is proclaiming
the Kingdom of God not seeing how you can fit it into your schedule and your plans for
financial security. Not that you get that from just a cursory reading of the text which is one
it would be easier to skip over as the whole lesson comes across as harsh. Think of it – our
merry band of disciples in this little slice of day-to-day traveling with Jesus are ready to call
down fire from heaven to consume a village of Samaritans who weren’t being receptive to
their visit. “Should we just burn them up and destroy the town?” sounds like a renegade
posse from an Old Western – not what you’d expect from the lips of proclaimers of the
Kingdom of God – the Kingdom of Forgiveness and Love, Restoration and Life Eternal.

But the key lies early in this scene where we are told Jesus “set his face to Jerusalem”
which, to show the importance of these words is repeated – if you hear it twice it has much
more than twice the weight when you’re reading Scripture. “Fixed his gaze like flint” is
another way I’ve heard it expressed – Jesus is looking to Jerusalem where He knows He will
die to pay the price of sin – to set the captives of sin and death free forever from bondage to
both. God’s Kingdom has come in Jesus and that needs to be proclaimed – Freedom has
arrived.

A Face like Flint Focused on Freedom – that’s where this Gospel meets the Epistle
and our lives this Fourth of July weekend when Paul says,
For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke
of slavery. For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your
freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one
another.

That Face like Flint Focused on Freedom accomplished the task – freedom forever
from sin and the wages of sin, death. Ah, but standing firm, not submitting again to the
yoke of slavery to things like, “biting and devouring one another, or indulging in
fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger,
quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these,” that’s an
elemental task quite large enough for the work of the Holy Spirit to accomplish in our lives.

Elsewhere Paul says, “Having done everything to stand firm, stand firm to the end”
which is a military reference. Standing firm for a soldier meant standing back-to-back with
your fellow soldier against attack – circling, covering for one another, using all your
combined force and skill to stay alive and conquer the enemy. If you were left without a
fighting comrade you put yourself against a hill – leveled out a place to plant your feet firmly
and fought as the soldiers came toward you with the hill at your back and your shield and
sword in front of you, your spear planted and pointing at your foe and your knife in ready
reach should you lose your sword.

These images were familiar to the people – gave them an inkling of how serious this
battle was and is. Their world came at them with all the temptations we face today – all the
difficult family situations, employment problems, the allure of the forbidden…all the things
that can ensnare, enslave, pull us away from the freedoms that are ours by faith.

With bomb laden Mercedes in London that were fortunately left un-triggered (waste
of 2 good Mercedes if you ask me) and intentional acts of terror in Scotland and Spain
perhaps we don’t feel as free as we did last Sunday – terrorism seems to be on the rise. None of us feel as free as we did before 9-11 here in the “Land of the Free.” But, when you think of it, political freedom is a very slippery commodity and not at all equally distributed in our world. The kind of freedom we enjoy has been available for only a few centuries – less than a century for women and children even in our own country. Equal access to income, privilege, and education – those are just dreams for countless millions. The price for those freedoms – the blood of the patriots spilt on our own soil and far from here in places where any kind of freedom still remains tenuous. The look of freedom is quite different in differing societies and cultures.

The freedom that is ours in Christ – well it has a look about it, too. While the long list of maladies Paul presents is all too familiar it is the Fruits of the Spirit that stand out in contrast as hallmarks of freedom. In Christ, with the Good News of the Kingdom to proclaim – our lives are to have a distinctive look to them - to feature “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (Against such things there is no law, I might add.)

This past week I considered how I’d seen those traits lived out in the 97 years my Uncle lived on this earth. Uncle Wally always said “Herb was the good kid. When we went to Fall Creek, WI to visit the relatives he got to stay in town. I had to stay on the farm with Uncle Zempel. They had bedbugs in the straw-tick mattresses.” He was a good kid – taught my Aunt Ruthie how to make the loops and tie her own shoes when the others were making fun of her for not knowing how.

Being raised as one of 12 in a pastor’s house couldn’t have been easy but he, and his siblings grew to live balanced lives. Yes there was church every Sunday, Bible Study too, family was always essential and children were loved as they were, encouraged to be the best they could be. Life was full – he and Esther shared an exceptional love for more than 60 years and had six children. He built their house from a Sears kit and was a self-taught plumber, butcher, gardener (we’re getting some of his raspberry bushes next spring), vintner, wine-maker, fruit-tree grafter, a great golfer (he was shooting less than his age at 90 when he sold his house and could concentrate on his “short game.”), as well as a fisherman and hunter.

It sounds idyllic but no life on this earth is really simple and his was far from it. When he was 12 or 13 his best buddy Fritz Weber, the principal’s son who grew up to be the pastor who confirmed me, and another kid had a bright idea to ditch school and play on the ice along Lake Michigan (a block away). Herb was all for it until he realized his father was coming to teach confirmation that day so he stayed in school. Fritz and the other boy went – the other boy fell through the ice and drowned. My pastor told me that incident changed his whole life. Years later my cousin Donny who was only 3 died from burns after he fell into the boiling paraffin my Uncle Herb had used to clean some ducks.

The arms that held my Uncle and Aunt the day their son died were arms of love and support – of strong faith in Jesus. Grandma and Grandpa had each faced horrendous loss as young teens. Grandpa lost his mother and infant brother to Typhus and Grandma lost four little sisters and brothers in a week to Black Diphtheria. Their arms held them close – their faith in Jesus who set His face like flint and faced Jerusalem to give us the Kingdom – faith
in that deed accomplished, faith shared and shown in love helped them to find love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

When I was 19 Uncle Herb shared his testimony of faith with me. When he said, “Accidents happen, Bobby. All children are born with challenges. The most important thing we have to share is faith in Jesus Christ” I thought I had an appreciation for the courage and strength of faith it took for him to speak those words. At almost 54 they mean more.

There is nothing more important for people to know than Jesus – and no better way for them to see it and hear it than in the lives of freedom in faith and love that we live.

AMEN