

Year C, June 30, 2019
3 Pentecost (Proper 8)
Christ Church, Mexia

Our opening story today deals with a couple at the Pearly Gates. You seemed to enjoy last week's so much... "It is a clergy couple, and they could see that St. Peter was diligently making entries on a long scroll of parchment with a quill pen. Then St. Peter looked up and stood up. 'I'm so glad to see you both. You can help me get things moving a bit. I need some flexible people... like Episcopal clergy. You see, the heavenly computer is down. I have to do everything by hand, but if you just agree to return to earth for a day or two, when you come back there will be no qualifying questions. I'll just wave my hand and the gates will open and the trumpets will sound and you'll be home. You can go back to earth as anything you want. How does that sound?'

The couple looked at each other and nodded yes. St. Peter said, 'Ladies first. How do you want to return to earth?' 'I've always wanted to fly like an eagle,' she said. 'Done,' said St. Peter with a wave of his hand. She was gone. He didn't even ask if she wanted to be a bald eagle or a golden eagle.

'And now you,' said St. Peter turning his attention to the man. The man looked at the ground and shuffled his feet and cleared his throat. 'Whatever I choose and whatever I do down there won't make a difference when the time is up, will it?' 'No, no. The heavenly computer is down. We can't even pull up your record or track you. No worries,' answers St. Peter. 'Okay, then, this is a little unusual, I know, but I've always wanted to be a stud.' 'Done,' said St. Peter and with a wave of his hand, the man was gone. He didn't even ask if the man wanted to be a surfer dude or a ski bum.

(Anyway), it took six days to fix the heavenly computer. Then everyone rested on the seventh day. Day eight, St. Peter got to work and cleared up the backlog. No more parchment and quill pen to slow him down. Jesus stopped by to see how things were going and reminded St. Peter not to forget the clergy couple back on earth. 'I'm on it,' said St. Peter. 'I've already sent some angels down to locate them. The woman wanted to be an eagle, and right now she should be catching some thermals over the Kittanitty Ridge near Hawk Mountain.' 'And the man?' asked Jesus. 'He wanted to be a stud,'

answered St. Peter, 'so he's on a snow tire somewhere in North Dakota.'"

Be careful what you choose! One of the points made by both Paul and the author of Luke today are that we have freedom and choices, and we should be careful in making those choices. Now it may seem that Jesus was a bit harsh with the people who wanted to follow him, but he was just following the theme: 1) "I will follow you wherever you go" sounds like a good choice and Jesus' answer may sound strange, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." What? Jesus is telling him it won't be easy to follow him – make sure that you understand the costs of discipleship before making this choice. Something we all need to understand. 2) Let me bury my father first says another who was called; let the dead bury the dead replies Jesus. It was a sacred duty for a Jewish son to bury his father, but we don't even know if the father is dead or ill. Still it is a deferral, a procrastination. And psychologists confirm that if we don't act on our thoughts and feelings when we have them, we probably won't. Think about it. I'm sure that, like me, you can think of things we should have done, but didn't. 3) The third just wants to say goodbye to family and friends and Jesus tells him about plowing - if you look back you're not fit for the kingdom. If we focus on the past, what we are doing now will suffer. Jesus has just recently experienced the Transfiguration and he has his face set on Jerusalem. To "set ones' face" is a prophetic act that suggests a stern resolution, or possibly single-mindedness. For example, Jesus has chosen the shortest route to Jerusalem, through Samaria, where hospitality will not be extended to Jews – no place to lay his head. Jesus wants disciples to be fully engaged. And think of it this way, if Jesus were being harsh, might he not have sided with his disciples who wanted to call down fire on the village who didn't receive them?

The point of the passages today is that Christian freedom is not unrestrained permission to do what one pleases. Paul reminds us that God called us to freedom, but that freedom is not for self-indulgence. We think of freedom as the absence of restraint or encumbrance or entanglement. But as Mark Douglas asks: "Who is freer: the confirmed bachelor or the husband and father discovering the range of emotions, values and possibilities made possible through those relationships? Who will be freer: people in a society that votes for leaders who shape the laws that govern them or people in a society in which people have stopped voting? Who is freer: the woman who chooses to take ordination vows that bind her to the church or the one

for whom ordination is not an option? Freedom is not separation from relationships; it is a feature of relationships that becomes especially apparent as a result of our relationships with Jesus Christ.” And Paul in his letter to the Galatians is clear that relationships ought to be shaped by love of neighbor.

“One commentator has said that Paul is reminding us that Christ’s perfect freedom engages us in a call. That call carries an obligation to neighbor as well as to God, to invest ourselves in the community of faith, to put up with the sandpaper of fellow congregants’ wearisome ways against the rough edges of our own unholiness. That call impels us to prepare our hearts for worship ... to exist in community with such openness and generosity that our neighbor’s well-being is part and parcel to our own.” (Carol E. Holtz-Martin)

And Richard Shaffer states: “The Christian journey does not demand that we reject our responsibilities to family and vocation but, rather, encourages us to see those needs in the light of our faith and through the lens of our deepening commitment to Christ.” In other words, I think the gospel story today points out the difference between worshiping and following. To follow Christ is different than to worship Christ. It is more of a heartfelt matter, rather than the outcome of a rational decision-making process. It requires more, and in following Christ, we may find ourselves at odds with our culture, and so it does require a certain level of single-mindedness.

It requires that we do things, not to earn our way into heaven, or to fulfill the needs of the flesh – ego, self-esteem, need for affiliation or others – but because we know and truly understand all that God has done for us. That we understand the single-mindedness of God in loving us and wanting a relationship with us, but still gives us the freedom to choose. We do it in appreciation for this. We choose to do it out of love for God and our neighbor. That is Christian freedom, and it is relationship-based with the focus on the other, not self. That is what I discern from the gospel story today.

(silence)

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit.
Amen.