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**Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA**

**The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost**

**July 5th, 2020**

Zechariah 9:9-12

Psalm 145: 8-15

Romans 7:15-25a

Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

## **Freedom**

I feel compassion for Paul, who wrote to the Christians in Rome, saying, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want but do the very thing I hate." He goes on to say, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." A few months ago, as part of a small group assignment, I did an activity in which I drew two columns. On the left side of the page, I listed all the things I want to do. They included values, goals, and aspirations that I know will improve my life. Some of the items on the list included trying to get 8 hours of sleep each night, eating three balanced meals a day and no more than one snack, exercising 3-5 days per week, saving money, etc. On the right side of the paper, I listed all the things I tend to do each day like sleeping 4-5 hours, shopping online, sitting at the computer until I feel like the tin man from the Wizard of Oz, and eating the kind of foods that are not helping me maintain good health. After compiling the lists, I shared my observations with the other small group participants. I discovered that I could not understand why I resist doing the things that I say I value and are essential to a good life. I wondered why all the right choices live in the land of someday, and all the behaviors that do not help me take up residence today. I tell myself, "Knowing the right thing to do is meaningless if you don't do it. Someday is not a day of the week. You only have today. Make better choices today". It irks me that intelligence alone will not bail me out of this problem. "It is time to declare my independence from all that enslaves me and keeps me from becoming my best self," I declare. "I will be free of this bondage." My promises to myself last until it is time to make my choice, and then I do the same old things.

There are other changes I want to make. These are changes that impact the lives of others. I want to be more compassionate with people who I think are challenging and difficult. I want to spend more time listening to those who are alone, scared, and frightened as we live through this pandemic. I want to stand up

to oppressive and dehumanizing behaviors and claim the right for everyone to be treated with dignity and respect. I want the courage to be an ally to those who are denied the most basic of freedoms, so they know that they are not alone.

All the changes I need to make are within my control. I do not have to consider what other people think or might say. I do not have to factor into my decisions that someone else might become fearful because I am trying to better my life and the lives of others. I can actively work to dismantle the harmful effects of prejudice, bigotry, and division born of fear tactics. I can choose to take a path that is more closely aligned with my faith. These are reasonable goals. All that stands between accomplishing them or continuing with business, as usual, is me.

Sometimes I imagine Jesus sitting in my recliner watching me wrestle with my unsatisfactory behavior until I am exhausted by the effort. He also seems to be perplexed as to why my choosing to do the right thing is never as natural for me as doing nothing to change. "Stop fighting this alone." He seems to say. "Lay down these burdens. Come to me and learn from me. Let me show you the way to live." For so many years, I thought there was value in the struggle. I thought it was important to "Do it myself!" The idea of letting go and "Let God" is a bit scary, and yet I know I am now ready to stop listening to myself and to learn from Jesus.

Yesterday, July 4<sup>th</sup>, marked the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Thirteen American colonies told the world that they were no longer subject to British rule. The signers listed their grievances to explain why they were acting. They justified their decision by stating their values when they said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

Not long after the United States won its independence, it created its Constitution which includes this preamble, "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."

For 244 years, our country has wrestled with the values and aspirations embodied in these documents. Many have struggled continuously with how to make these ideas a reality. Like the exercise I described earlier, we list our desire to live in a country in which all people are treated as having been created equal, and everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We have on our list what it would look like to have a government that encouraged domestic tranquility born out of fair and just treatment for all. Our list includes the possibility that our country will someday promote the general welfare by providing

quality healthcare and education for every resident. In the end, our list includes everything that would help us to be a more perfect union for everyone.

Then there is that other side of the page. The things we and our society keep doing that keep us in bondage to the very behaviors we hate—the inequities, injustice, and the divisions that keep us from working together to achieve our goals. As we, like Paul, wrestle with the need to do good and find ourselves doing the opposite, we become frustrated and wonder who will help us. Maybe now is the time for us to stop and consider Jesus' offer to learn from him. Maybe now is the time to walk through life more humbly, gently seeking to heal the world as our savior did with love and kindness, compassion, and understanding, faith, and trust in God.

The journey to freedom, whether personal or societal, is worthwhile. It is worthwhile because, as followers of Jesus Christ, we know it is the right path for us. It is, however, challenging, and difficult to take this journey alone. Nelson Mandela said, "There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere, and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desires." So, let us travel the path to freedom together. And let us follow the One who knows how to walk through the valley of the shadow of death guided by a light that can never be extinguished. Jesus will take us to the mountaintop.