

Pentecost 3C, Proper 8

June 26, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

2 Kings 2: 1-2, 6-14

Psalm 77: 1-2,11-20

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

Luke 9: 51-62

It is hard to know what to say this morning after this week's news from the January 6th Committee and the Supreme Court's overruling Roe versus Wade and 50 years of precedent. These things, along with Ukraine, the environment, the economy, and the ongoing division in the country can lead one to despair. I was so anxious about what to say that yesterday, when I was with Altar Guild members Gina and Questa to plan the procedure for our new way of serving the cup, I asked if either of them would like to preach for me! They declined!

So, well, let me tell you of my trip last weekend and the sweetness of old friends that endures through everything; and then let's turn to the scripture this morning to see how we might be encouraged in Christ.

Last weekend was a trip to Richmond, Virginia, to see my old Methodist college chaplain confirmed in the Episcopal Church at the age of

81. In doing so it meant giving up his credentials in the Methodist Church, so, as you can guess, it was a decision long in coming, and not without some sense of loss. Bob Stamps had a profound influence on my life, especially in appreciating deeply meaningful liturgy – he was what I describe as a ‘high church Methodist’! He also was an amazing preacher using the extemporaneous style – and my meager attempts at this are inspired by him. He also encouraged me in the contemplative way and that is what started me on the Centering Prayer path 45 years ago.

He was the one who introduced me to Fr. Robert Dubrowski, the polish Franciscan priest who survived Dachau. Do you remember the story I told you about how they surreptitiously celebrated Communion? I was reminded of a powerful detail by Bob during this visit.....since they weren’t allowed to celebrate Mass, some Catholic guards would smuggle in a little bread and wine and one of the 1800 priests would be chosen to walk the compound and celebrate while others looked on while pretending to be busy, and then he would consume on behalf of them all. By the way, this is where I got the idea of the little chalice put in front of the lectern during the last number of months of the pandemic for one person to consume it on behalf of everyone. But the one piece I had forgotten was

that the priests' barracks were near the ovens, and while the priest walked and celebrated Communion ashes of the dead were falling all around him. What a powerful, chilling, resisting, resurrection-filled image!

Well, we had a wonderful visit and talked and talked and talked. Our first visit over lunch last Saturday lasted 4 hours! He and his wife, Ellen, came to my confirmation in 1977, so I thought it would be good for me to be at his. Photos of my confirmation are available on the buffet in the Fellowship Room for your amusement.

By the way, Ellen was the personal assistant for Corrie ten Boom, the Dutch woman of deep Christian faith who, along with her family, hid Jews in a hiding place in their home during World War II, and were subsequently caught and all sent to prison camp. Corrie was the only one who survived and went on to write a book called *The Hiding Place*, and went around the world telling her story. It was eventually turned into a movie.

Bob and I had lost touch. When I left ORU and gradually came out, I knew that Bob was in a theological place that would not be accepting. ORU was and is a deeply conservative place. Interestingly, one of my friends from that college, who also became an Episcopal priest and is gay, had

found Ellen through Facebook and told me that Ellen was very progressive. I found it hard to believe, but I ventured to reach out, and low and behold both Ellen and Bob had moved theologically 180 degrees on the gay issue and a lot of previously held fundamentalist views on scripture and church. This is what eventually brought him to the Episcopal Church. So, it was interesting to see how we both had been on very different journeys spiritually, but ended up in very similar places. Bob is a really good hymn writer, and in closing, I'm going to share a hymn he recently wrote. Perhaps, borrowing from the Old Testament lesson this morning, and in reverence for my old chaplain, this was my Elijah/Elisha story of me going to him to request a double portion of his spirit!

This morning's readings are an interesting juxtaposition of the freedom we have in Christ and the kind of dedication and sacrifice we are called to. These come through very strongly in the epistle and gospel readings. Let's review the beginning of this Galatian passage..."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. For the whole law is

summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' " As we know, much of Paul's writing was convincing the followers of Jesus, both Jew and Gentile, that they were now free from 'the Law' as Jews typically understood it.

This is another great Christian dichotomy and juxtaposition: We have been set free to become slaves to one another. And how is this achieved? It is by being rooted and grounded in love; and it is through the Holy Spirit that we achieve this love. After a description of those who do not exemplify this life in the Spirit, the letter goes on to say that the fruit of this Spirit is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness/generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." I think everyone should have these words posted on their fridge, and to help you, you have a sheet in your bulletin for just such a purpose.

Now let's turn to the gospel lesson. How does Jesus' teaching connect with this notion of Paul's freedom/discipleship? In Luke we begin what has been called the travel narrative, and it goes from this chapter, 9, through to about 19---and we read this in succession over the next 4 months. It is called the travel narrative because, as it says in our reading, Jesus has 'set his face toward Jerusalem', and from here on he is traveling.

This comes soon after the Transfiguration in Luke's gospel where Jesus has been up on a mountain with Peter, John, and James....and who did they see with him? Ah yes, Moses and Elijah!

The story tells us he sent some disciples up ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare him, but they did not receive him because "his face was set toward Jerusalem". The Samaritans differed in their belief about where God was to be worshipped--Jerusalem was not the place. The disciples were obviously insulted and wanted permission to call down fire from heaven. But Jesus rebuked them. Like adolescent boys, they wanted to "nuke" 'em. Well, they got an appropriate response of rebuke from Jesus.

The gospel story goes on to give example about the radical call of discipleship. Someone offered to follow him anywhere. Jesus responded by saying that birds and foxes had homes, but he had nowhere to lay his head. By the way, this passage of scripture had another Bob Stamps memory....I remember him preaching on this text and breaking down in tears because he has just bought his first home, but Jesus had nowhere to lay his head. When I recounted this story to him, he told me he put up a plaque in his home that said something to the effect "Welcome home, Jesus, now and always".

Then, in the last part of this gospel, he said 'follow me', and the person asked to be able to go bury his father first. Jesus responded, "Let the dead bury their own dead." Another wanted to go say goodbye to family and friends, but Jesus told him he was unfit if he looked back.

Now, frankly I have a hard time with this severe cost of discipleship. Especially the demand to the one who wanted to bury his father--that they should let others do it. As someone who, as part of the Hospice movement, has constantly preached the necessity of conscious grieving and ritualizing a death, this goes against my grain. But, of course, the lesson here is not about burying the dead or saying goodbye to family; it is about the radical call to follow Christ. This call may mean that you leave the comfort of a secure home behind, that you let go of family and those who would keep you from the way of love.

A great German pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, knew this call and followed it all the way to prison in Nazi Germany because of his beliefs, and ultimately his execution. Goodness, lots of WWII stories in this sermon! He wrote a book about this call entitled *The Cost of Discipleship*. In this book he spoke of the hard lessons of faithfulness. One of my favorite phrases from this book was "cheap grace", whereby he characterized

shallow faith. Cheap grace is the kind of grace that pretends to follow Christ, only really finding any excuse to double back for your own good, then ask for easy pardon on Sundays.

Well, my friends, our times call for a deep commitment and no cheap grace. We stand on the shoulders of great people who have led the world to a better place, and common folk like old college chaplains that have shown us the way. We evolve as we grow in Christ to deeper love and witness. And grow we must. We are being called ever-deeper to a radical following where the fruits of the Spirit become a vibrating, shimmering presence in our lives. And in love we find a way to resist evil – like Ghandi, like Martin Luther King Jr., like Mother Theresa and Dorothy Day, like Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and like Corrie Ten Boom. We also find the way to the fruits of the Spirit....please say them after me as a final little meditation....

And, as a summary of what I've been trying to say, let me offer this hymn of Bob's....

A Hymn to Life Tune: O Waly, Waly

*A hymn to God, Who, strong yet meek,
Unfurls the stars, enfolds the weak,
Who asks our best, but loved us first,
And loves us still, despite our worst.*

*A hymn to Christ, Whose worker's hand
Carved life from death, forged rock from sand;
From Whose full heart rich mercies flow,
Each gift received, a gift we owe.*

*A hymn to Church, our waking place
To early calls and signs of grace,
Where soaring hearts learn thoughtful ways,
And searching minds are led to praise.*

*A hymn to love, a hymn to life -
A family's care in peace and strife.
No sweeter gift, save God alone,
Than those whom life has named our own.*

*A hymn to friends, life's long surprise
Of opened doors and widened eyes.
'Round laughing fires of wit and art,*

We dance a while, then weep to part.

*The Spirit's hymn, God's song between,
What mortals chant, what angels sing;
It lifts our hearts in common bond
With saints still here and saints beyond.*

*Let thankful souls, then, go in peace,
Run swiftly to a higher feast;
God's joy for wine, God's light for bread.
Feast long our hearts at table spread!*

The Rev. Dr. Robert J. Stamps