

Called to Freedom

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

July 2, 2023 Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Independence Day Sunday

Psalm 16; Galatians 5-6

Welcome: Good morning, and welcome to the United Church of Strafford on this Fifth Sunday after Pentecost and Independence Day Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online, and welcome to musician, Rolf Pechukas!

We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom which sees all life and the land itself as gifts of the Spirit.

This week the Supreme Court made a ruling involving LGBTQ+ people and Christians. Leaving aside the legal aspects and injustice to an oppressed group, the message that it sends at first glance is that in our country Christians are free to hate and discriminate against a group based on that group's biology and legal expression of faithful love.

It makes Christianity look like a state-sanctioned hate group.

There are many ways we can respond to this, but one of the most important is for us to be the opposite, to be a love group, to show that our understanding of the teachings and life of Jesus and our spiritual tradition is that we are to extend our love ever wider until it includes all people and creatures and the whole earth.

We can model this here today by opening our hearts and offering our care and support to all, greeting especially those we do not know well. We can first be the change we wish to see in the world, and then go out and work for that change.

Call to Worship: Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free!" Paul taught those churches about the Spirit that is freely available within and around us all, but others have come along after Paul and told the Galatians that they need to conform to cultural and religious rules before they can experience the Spirit.

This makes Paul angry. Paul wants to tear down any barrier to a Spirit-filled life, anything that oppresses or enslaves us, anything that holds us back from the freedom to fulfill our calling and use our gifts.

Let us worship together in the faith that by seeking and following the Spirit we will find our way to free and fulfilled lives, and make the world more loving and just.

Children's Time: The controversial French writer named Léon Bloy said "Any Christian who is not a hero is a pig."

The last time I quoted that, Linda Williams rose up and fiercely defended pigs, which of course are intelligent, virtuous and lovable animals.

Linda proved exactly what Leon Bloy was saying—someone who follows the way of Christ truly and faithfully will stand up for those whom others attack or mistreat. Jesus found within himself the Spirit that created the earth and all creatures, humans and pigs alike, and it led him to act boldly and courageously for the cause of love and justice and peace.

Thomas Merton was another hero of the Spirit like Linda and Jesus. Merton said that what we each are asked to do as a hero does not come from a voice 'out there' calling us to be something we are not. It comes from a voice 'in here' calling us to be the person the Spirit created us to be.

The Bible is full of stories of heroes hearing their calling from God, but sometimes we are not free at first to follow the Spirit's lead. Jonah ran away and had to be swallowed by a whale and spat back out on the shore. Moses heard the burning bush, but tried to talk God out of making him go to old Pharaoh and tell him to let his people go.

We each have gifts that God needs, that our community needs, that the world needs, and we are called to be heroes, to be brave and serve the cause of love and goodness when people, creatures and the earth are under attack. If we feel doubt about what our gifts and callings are, or we feel overwhelmed or tempted to run away, there is something we can do that can help us be the hero we are called to be, a tool that has helped countless other heroes...

Pray! Let us say together the Lord's Prayer...

Called to Freedom

The Spirit of the Universe calls us to freedom.

Most of us would be slaves today if this were not true, but because it is true, Moses went down to Egypt and liberated his people from that day's greatest empire, and Jesus and his followers gave their lives to free people from the oppression of that day's greatest empire, and Mahatma Gandhi, inspired by the nonviolent action of Jesus, organized the oppressed people of India to throw off that day's greatest empire.

In our own country, the underfunded, untrained colonists threw off King George and his mercenaries, and in the past hundred years one liberation movement after another has risen up to free those our society had marginalized and abused.

This congregation is part of the same Spirit-led freedom movement, giving our time and resources to help free the victims of environmental destruction and racism and bigotry.

This week we saw some setbacks for this movement for freedom. It is natural to feel despair. I suspect every person in every freedom struggle throughout the ages has had their Garden of Gethsemane moments, like 26 year old Martin Luther King Jr. sitting at his Montgomery kitchen table overwhelmed by the death threats to his wife and baby and by the monolithic power of the white segregationists determined to stop his people. But like King, if we bring our anguish into our prayer and listen deeply for the voice of the Spirit, we will hear it tell us that it is with us, offering us the comfort and rest as well as the courage and strength we need to keep working for the cause of love and life and light.

The film *Freedom Song* takes place in a small town in Mississippi in the 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement was just starting to come into that state. An organizer from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or SNCC has come down from Chicago. Daniel Wall is a gentle, quiet school teacher, and not at all the inspiring rabble-rouser that one high school student named Owen hoped he would be.

Toward the end of the film Daniel and Owen are in a jail cell together, along with other SNCC organizers and local high school students who had walked out of school to stage a protest. Owen is loudly despairing that what they have done has amounted to nothing. Everything is still segregated, and now they are in jail.

Daniel quietly tells Owen that it was not all for nothing. He tells him that people in New Orleans have heard about the students' arrest, and decided to come to their town and continue the nonviolent action they have begun. Daniel explains that he is there for a similar reason. He had seen news stories about the first sit-ins at lunch counters and it moved him to volunteer with SNCC.

He said, "They lit a flame and I saw the light from that flame a thousand miles away... When you walked out of that school, you didn't just make a march, you picked up a torch. Now other folks have seen your light, and they are coming here to carry it on because you can't right now, and if they go to jail, too, other folks will pick up their torch. So you are not on your own, Owen, you are part of something bigger than you. You are part of the Movement."

The Apostle Paul was part of the same movement. He had been one of the oppressors, but by amazing grace, though he once was blind he now could see. He dedicated his life and willingly suffered for the Spirit's cause of freedom and for the love of the oppressed, and millions have seen the torch he raised and let their own light shine.

Paul wrote, "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, friends; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become servants to one another.... The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.... Those who have the heart and mind of Christ have crucified the ego with its selfish passions and desires. If we were created by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit... so that we will work for the good of all and we will live as one."

There is so much spiritual and practical wisdom in that passage. Paul understood the benefits of a Spirit-filled life, the oneness, the peace, joy and love. But he also understood human nature and how easy it is to give up our freedom when we are uncertain or afraid or desiring a materially easy life.

The hymn, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," known as the Black National Anthem, is in the section of the hymnal that is about both "grace" and "strength in tribulation." It is a triumphant song about the freedom and rights gained in the struggle, and yet it also contemplates the danger of losing our way, submitting to exhaustion or distraction or self-indulgence.

The personal is political in the spiritual life. The Spirit wants to build a sustainable harmony of freedom on earth, but to paraphrase the Taoist teaching on peace, there can be no free flow of Spirit in the world without it first freely flowing through our hearts and lives. We need to wage a revolution for our own freedom from whatever holds us back, whether it be outer oppression or our own fear or addiction. The Spirit calls us and needs us to be free to use the gifts it has given us for the sake of its love and light.

This is why Gandhi said that silent prayer was his greatest weapon in the struggle for India's independence. It is why he sang hymns like those we are singing today and reflected on sacred writings. It is why the theme the Church Council has chosen for the next four months of sabbatical time is so important, "Seeking Spirit." The Spirit needs us to be its instruments of peace and justice, and it takes heroic inner work to free ourselves to do heroic outer work.

Seeking Spirit involves opening our hearts to hear the call to serve the Spirit's cause and movement. We can trust that the Spirit that evolved humanity and democracy and all life on earth will have work for us to do together to save and renew what the Spirit has created. We can also trust it to guide and empower us all along the way.

That is a joyous and hopeful truth, and a good thing to celebrate on Independence Day. Let us pray in silence, practicing opening wide to the Spirit and freeing ourselves to follow where it leads...

Communion Invitation:

Jesus saw that to bring into being
a new heaven and new earth
we need to be transformed,
we need a new body and new blood,
so he gave us his own.
Jesus saw that citizens of a new earth
need to have a new heart and mind,
so he called us to metanoia, opening ourselves
to have the heart and mind of Christ
to create God's realm around us.

Jesus saw that to create a new society
we need a new way to live that we can proclaim,
so he taught us to love all people and creatures
and include all in our care.

Come to this table now to create
that new heaven and new earth
by receiving a new body and new blood,
a new heart and mind, a new message, a new love,
breaking bread together as one.

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

A newly hatched ant
so tiny—a bit of life
filled with the spirit.