

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

August 9, 2015; the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2;

John 6:35, 41-51

Finding our Freedom

Two months ago, I preached a sermon about “man-made systems of governance.”

The reading from the Hebrew scripture that day was the account of God’s people, Israel, asking to have a king to lead them.

That complex issue that is presented in the Bible from two perspectives: yes, this small tribe was in danger all the time, from outside forces that could destroy them, and a king could help them organize and survive;

on the other hand, God was already their king, and Israel was not like other nations, but holy, set apart, to be God’s people.

And so they are warned, having a king, and the system of governance that goes with that, will not be without great sacrifice and new limits to their freedom.

Into today’s reading from 2nd Samuel, we see an example of sacrifice and grief that comes from Absalom’s death, for the king himself, King David.

As one commentator notes, “The death of Absalom is not a simple case of grief over a dead son. It is a tragic conclusion of a complex story of love and betrayal, forgiveness, and heartbreak, political duty and power battles.”¹

David and Absalom had a rocky father-son relationship; each thinking he

¹ Additional Batches of Commentary on Year B from *Feasting on the Word*, website, downloads, file:///home/chronos/u-c1dfefd764607fc354282704f8a64b460c8f1e42/Downloads/FOW-Year%20B-Batch%20%20(2).pdf, from Pastoral commentary on 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 by Eleazar S. Fernandez.

knew what was best for the family and kingdom, had resulted in Absalom being banished, and then welcomed back, and then Absalom decided to challenge his father for the kingship.

King David's advisers believed that all this drama with Absalom was bad for the king's ability to lead, and so wanted Absalom dead, and by chance the perfect opportunity came along, Absalom caught in the branches, and David's own man kills Absalom against King David's command.

And David is heartbroken.

In a certain way, both David, and Absalom were caught-up in a system that enabled this "life or death" drama to play out.

Yes, each had personal choices to make and personal responsibility, but the situation in which they found themselves, the structures, the institutions, the culture, provided the framework in which they lived, therefore providing or limiting their choices.

We too live within structures, institutions, and cultures that provide or limit our choices.

For example, we would like to live in a nation where everyone is recognized as being equal and treated with love and respect, but it is so depressing and scary to see how little my personal choices seem to make a difference, when we keep hearing of hate crimes of all kinds, and I was reminded recently, as I am almost weekly, of what my African-American, Black, brothers and sisters have to deal with everyday.

Peter Jarrett Schell, and Episcopal priest posted on Facebook on July 31, an account of he, his wife, her brother, and their two-year old son being pulled over by police, the account was republished on a news site, saying:

The Rev. Peter Schell is an Episcopal priest and the lead pastor of **Calvary Episcopal Church** in Washington, D.C. His wife, Rondesia, is also an ordained Episcopal priest. On a road trip from Washington to Florida, Peter a white man, and Rondesia, a black woman, were traveling with their interracial family and had their first family experience of what truly appears to be racist police harassment. In the car with the couple was their 2-year old son, and Rondesia's brother.²

To summarize, Peter and the others were questioned by police in a way that reminded me of Jewish people being questioned by the SS when trying to leave Nazi occupied areas lands during WWII. I recently watched the movie, *The Woman in Gold*, and it gives a powerful look at the dehumanization of Jews in Austria as the Nazi system became part of the way of life there. And not to compare the two very different situations, but both speak to me of dehumanization...and seeing our brothers and sisters in our human family as “other.”

As a white person in this culture, the system is set up so that I don't have to think about racism everyday...but I need to...we need to...and we in this church try to...but we cannot do it on our own...think about and fight racism and every other injustice that we see, but we have another system, another culture, another reality in which you and I live.

And God wants us to live in it more and more...having a deeper and deeper connection with God and reign of God to which we ourselves point, as a community of faith and as individual Christians.

In fact it is so different that it inspired Stanley Hauerwas and William

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<http://www.dailykos.com/story/2015/08/03/1408406/-Episcopal-Priest-on-road-trip-with-interracial-family-shares-harrowing-story-of-police-harassment#>

Willimon to entitle their book about the Christian life, *Resident Aliens*; the idea being that we are resident aliens in our culture, in the systems and structures of our country and our world, because we belong to a new creation.³

This is the reality spoken of in Ephesians, we are a new creation. Through baptism we have become people who are empowered by the Spirit to do good, to do what God desires us to do, to be those who put away falsehood and wrath, and are instead kind to one another, tenderhearted, and forgiving.

Kindness in our world includes all the little things we do out of our love and care for people and our love for God; and kindness includes pursuing justice and equality for all.

As one commentator notes, the ethics and virtues listed in this section of The Letter to the Ephesians, “are not merit badges set out for us to achieve.

Rather, they are marks of the new life given to us in baptism.”⁴ We are called to be imitators of God, to live as Jesus lived, to live our lives in love.

Be it dealing with personal grief or personal suffering, or dealing with death-dealing systems or situations, to us Jesus says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Whoever comes will have eternal life---will live forever---and will even live now---we who hunger and thirst for justice will be satisfied in our relationship with God,

³ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens, Life in the Christian Colony*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989.

⁴ Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown, eds. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3, Pentecost and the Season After Pentecost 1*, G. Porter Taylor, *Theological Perspective*. John Knox Press, Epub., 2008. Loc. 11562 of 13935

and through God will have courage and hope to show forth, in our lives, what we know now in part through God's life with and in us.

But how do we come to Jesus?

Last Sunday I spoke about the grace, the strength, the comfort, the courage that we get for life by coming to church, because this is one place where we know we are receiving the bread of life; We know are connecting with God with Jesus, the Christ, through this experience of worshiping in community.

But what about the rest of the time, what about when we are in trouble or danger or we are called to stand in solidarity with those who are. Well, what happens here and now, helps us with the rest of the week.

As well, our personal spiritual practices during the week help, a lot. Last Sunday after church during the Forum, we shared with each other some of the ways we connect with God, how sometimes we wonder if we are, and our desire to connect with God, who is the ground of our being.

Join us for the second part of our Forum on the Spirituality of Life, and learn about prayer practices that can help you to be aware of God's love for you all the time.

I will be speaking about Ignatian spirituality and Joella will lead us in considering what sort of prayer temperament we each have...what sort of prayer works best for you.

We all live in circumstances that limit our freedom, some more so than others.

It is our awareness of God's life with us and in us that gives us true freedom, courage, and peace.

Our spiritual practices help us to be aware of God's love, and also aware of our membership in God's new creation, which we know now in part through Christ, in the power of the Spirit. Amen.