

ST. CHRISTOPHER'S CHURCH
COBLESKILL, NEW YORK

June 27, 2010 – PENTECOST 5C / PROPER 8

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Sermon: “*The Freedom to Follow Jesus*”

1 Kings 19:15-16,19-21	(Elisha becomes servant of the Prophet Elijah)
Psalms 16	(The Lord is our Protector; He will not abandon us)
Galatians 5:1,13-25	(Christ has set us free)
St. Luke 9:51-62	(No one who looks back is fit for God's kingdom)

There may be someone sitting here this morning, thinking, “I’m not a bad person. In fact, I’m a pretty good person. I don’t abuse my spouse, children, or anybody else. I don’t shortchange my employer or cheat on my income tax. I’m not a substance abuser and I don’t have a criminal record. I keep my lawn mowed, and I help my neighbors. I attend church pretty often, even on a humid summer Sunday, and I give to charitable causes. Why, Jesus may even send me a thank-you note for my good behavior. Besides, He must be plenty busy trying to drag home folks who’ve gone astray. Wife beaters. Prostitutes. Drug dealers, thieves, and murderers.”

But notice, Jesus has this annoying habit of calling everyone, whether their life is an ethical disaster or an upstanding moral example. That’s because what interests Jesus is more personal. He wants all people, regardless of our behavior, to become His disciples.

Sometimes, following Jesus does call for setting aside immoral, even criminal, conduct. This is the stuff of dramatic conversion stories. The serial killer, the drug lord, the gang leader—they all come to faith and live a new life. Jesus asserts His power over the worst of human experiences. Drop the switchblade. Lift high the Cross!

For others, answering Jesus’ call to follow Him may mean setting aside what is good ... or at least, what is legal and respectable. The parent, the doctor, the business leader, too, come to faith and live differently than before. Jesus also asserts His priority over the best of human experiences. Drop the tennis racket. Lift high the Cross!¹

Today’s Gospel invites us to consider afresh what it means to follow Jesus, as we find Our Lord interviewing candidates for discipleship. The first candidate volunteers to follow Jesus without even being invited. That is, until Jesus describes for him how hard it will be. The man’s silence speaks volumes The second candidate asks permission to return home and bury his father. The father may be dead already. More likely, the man wants to put off discipleship until he has seen his father through old age. In any case, Jesus refuses permission. Discipleship has priority. The one invited to be Christ’s disciple must follow—now!

The third candidate makes a similar, but less dramatic appeal: “First, let me say goodbye to my family.” Again, Jesus gives a thumbs-down. This person, too, needs to hit the discipleship road—immediately!

At this point, Jesus utters a perplexing aphorism: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” But consider this: when an animal is pulling a plow, the farmer must keep his eyes fixed on a point ahead in order to plow a straight line. Looking back causes the plow to swerve. The result is a crooked furrow, which remains for the growing season, messes up the crops, and makes the farmer look foolish. To look back while on the discipleship road is equally foolish.²

Once we choose to follow Jesus, we will never again be our old selves. So Jesus wisely admonishes, “Don’t go there!” He knows that the devil continually tries to persuade us to look back at our sins, our unworthiness, and our failures. St. Paul understood, when he wrote in Philippians 3:13 (NLT), “I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead.”³

Jesus may call us out of the wreckage of our lives. He may also call us out of what we think of as good ... even the American dream fulfilled. In every case, Christ invites us into a deeper relationship with, and a greater allegiance to, Himself. Jesus wants to free us from our bondage, whether it is to drugs, alcohol, material possessions, or to success and respectability. Christ wants us to find our true freedom in Him, and Him alone.⁴ And it is this to which He invites each and every one of us.

In 1535, Martin Luther penned: “Christ has set us free, not for a political freedom or a freedom of the flesh, but for a ... spiritual freedom. Our conscience is free and joyful, unafraid of the wrath to come This is the most genuine freedom: it is immeasurable. For who can express what a great gift it is for someone to be able to declare for certain that God ... will be forever ... gracious and merciful?”⁵

The problem for many people is that freedom turns out to be more difficult than slavery. Freedom, after all, poses new responsibilities. Whereas formerly our choices were made for us by our self-centered sin, or a rote obedience to the law, now under grace we are free to be led by God’s Holy Spirit. And that involves increased communication and intimacy with God. As one Bible commentator puts it: “... freedom requires greater effort than a life of servitude. Freedom has to be nurtured, protected, and rigorously pursued. It is not a lifelong afternoon in a hammock.”⁶ Following Jesus is not a part-time pursuit, or an optional hobby!

So how do we achieve the spiritual freedom that comes through greater intimacy with Christ? How are we to understand what God is communicating to us, so that we may be led by His Spirit? Our relationship with God works the same way a human marriage works—we need to spend time with Him daily, allow ourselves to be open, honest, and vulnerable in His presence, talk to Him from our hearts, listen to how He responds, and then cooperate with Him by following His guidance.

Okay, you ask, how do I do that, since I can’t actually see, hear, or feel God? Well, I’m sure you’ve heard me say before that prayer is us talking to God, and the Bible is God talking to us. To be led by the wise Spirit of God and not by our own selfish, sinful thoughts and desires, requires two things: First, we must know the will of God. And second, we must be open His Spirit leading us.

God’s perfect will has been primarily revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures. And the more you know what the Bible says, the more familiar you will become with God’s point of view—about everything. So read the Bible daily. It only takes a few minutes to read the 1, 2, 3, or 4 lessons assigned by the *Book of Common Prayer*, which you can find in the weekly insert in your Sunday bulletin, or at the back of your Prayer Book. For example, this week’s readings for the Daily Office, Year Two, are on page 973. The numbers on the first line, with no Bible book listed, are the Psalms. The first psalm or psalms are to be read in the morning, the second set, in the evening.

After all, St. Christopher’s now has a reputation to uphold! At Diocesan Convention, Bishop Love gave us the “Biblical Literacy Award” for catching that the Convention’s key verse—where Jesus talks about carrying our cross—was Matthew 16:24, not Matthew 16:14, as had been widely published. The Bishop said, “We’d better get it right next year, or we’ll hear from St. Christopher’s, Cobleskill!”

As for being led by the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us first and foremost through the Scriptures. But He also communicates with us through our intuition, through dreams, through circumstances—you know, those “God-incidences?”—and through the counsel and advice of other Christians. He speaks to some people with actual words they hear with their ears, or in their minds, and to others through gut feelings, or a strong sense of direction.

But how do I know it’s God talking to me, you ask? Again, God will never instruct us to do anything that contradicts His Holy Word. Those people you read about in the news, who claim God told them to drown their children, or some other horrible thing? That’s not the Holy Spirit speaking! The more time you spend with God, in praise and prayer, in worship and adoration, in confession and conversation, in Bible study and reflection, the more open you will become to having God’s will be yours, and yours be God’s. Imagine how much better things will go for you, when you’re not running the show!

In the ancient world, a disciple followed his Master everywhere, and engaged in a constant give-and-take of talking and listening, of learning and obeying. And so, as disciples of Jesus, we are to talk to Him about everything, all the time—or, as St. Paul put it, “pray in the Spirit, always” (Ephesians 6:18). Feel free to ask for Our Lord’s help with anything you need. You’re not bothering Him! Ask Jesus to work out the problems you can’t solve; to find something you’ve lost; to repair a damaged relationship; to heal your sickness; to protect your children; to go before you in a tough situation to pave the way for a positive outcome. Daily seek God’s guidance and discernment, His insight and wisdom, as you go about your affairs, rather than relying on your own smarts—and you will find yourself seeing situations and people very differently. Ask in faith, according to God’s will. Trust Him, and He will act!

Some may chafe at the idea of having their lives directed by God’s Word and His Holy Spirit instead of being run by their own will and desires. It doesn’t seem like freedom. But consider the kite: For a kite, the freedom to fly is related to the string. The very thing that holds the kite to earth is what keeps it in the sky. Cut the string, and what will happen to the kite? It will fall. But the string, which seems to bind it, allows it to fly.⁷

Let’s be honest ... The demands that Our Lord makes go beyond our strength and ability. Yet that does not mean we should just ignore them. We can’t be Christ’s disciples on our own, no matter how good a person we may be. But with constant and regular exposure to Jesus through God’s Word, and frequently talking to and listening to Him in prayer, you will receive the guidance, strength, and will to follow Christ ... He who is the only Way, the only Truth, and the only Life.

And so, in closing, I pray:

Dearest Lord Jesus,
Savior and Friend,
three things I pray for us:
to see Thee more clearly,
to love Thee more dearly,
to follow Thee more nearly,
day by day.
Amen.⁸

¹ Adapt. Charles Hoffacker, “The Unexpected Call,” 2004, <http://www.lectionary.org/Sermons/Hoff/Lake/Lake%2009.51-62.%20UnexpectedCall.htm>, 24 June 2010. Used by permission.

² Adapt. Hoffacker, *op. cit.*

³ Adapt. Amy Carmichael, *Thou Givest, They Gather* (CLC, 1958), qtd. “Answering God’s Call,” *Synthesis, Year C*, 27 June 2010 (p. 3).

⁴ Adapt. Hoffacker, *op. cit.*

⁵ Qtd. *Synthesis, op. cit.*

⁶ Adapt. Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year C* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press Int’l, 1994), pp. 317-318.

⁷ “Freedom,” [Elbourne.org](http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?illustration=699) <<http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?illustration=699>> 24 June 2010.

⁸ Based on the Prayer of St. Richard of Chichester (1197-1253).