

Lectionary 13C Proper 8

June 26, 2022

*1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62*

Grace and peace to you, from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ...and the Spirit that continues to live and breathe and move among us.

It has been a lucrative week in my household. The mail brought some lovely greeting cards from a museum, a set of “Carolyn Tryggestad” address labels that will join five or six others in my desk drawer, a Ranger Rick sample magazine that will delight my granddaughter, and the first set of 2023 calendars: wall, desk and pocket sized from an conservation organization, the first of what is likely to be a dozen by the time 2023 actually rolls around.

And they were all free! I did not subscribe, donate, order or otherwise request any one of them. I no longer feel guilty receiving these freebies or keeping them; there are not too many Carolyn Tryggestads living in Walpole to donate them to, after all. I am, in fact, somewhat skeptical about donating to some of the more frequent senders, wondering how much of my gift actually gets to the hospital/museum/animal/child or whatever charity it is.

But really, who doesn't like free? Free shows, free tickets, free kittens - well, maybe not free kittens. Buy one, get one free is usually a good deal, and if you are a store owner, “free while supplies last” does indeed get folks inside your door where they may just buy something else in addition to the freebie. Avid coupon downloaders manage to get lots of things almost free, unless you are like me and discover at checkout that you've left your phone with that coupon download in the car!

Certainly, sometimes free isn't free: when they call from that resort timeshare or retirement community, free dinner comes with an hour long spiel about the wonders of time shares and retirement living; and those free samples of software games or apps involve signing up with an email address and then finding your in-box filled to the brim with ads, not to mention the ads you have to wait through before your game begins!

And sometimes free isn't worth it: a tote bag that is too flimsy to hold groceries; the free seats so far in the back you can't see the stage; and the vet bills for those kittens-growing-into-cats that rival human medical costs, without the benefit of insurance.

St. Paul has a deeper concern about free, though: it seems some folks in Galatia were treating God's free gift of salvation and freedom from the old laws with all the respect given happy meal toys. Some were turning the forgiveness promised by Jesus into a "get out of jail free" card, thinking anything and everything was A-Ok. I'm saved so anything goes, and if not, I get forgiven anyway.

On the opposite end of the spectrum there were those who thought that free really couldn't possibly mean free from the tried-and-true laws that had been around for centuries and the rituals required by them. Circumcision and food restrictions, temple taxes and purity rituals surely had to be prerequisites for following Jesus.

Not so! Paul reminds them, and us, that we are free because of Christ: free *from* sin and *from* death, free *for* goodness and *for* life. It is because Jesus lived and died before rising again that we are set free - quite a price paid after all!

At the same time, we are also free to choose that freedom and the responsibility that goes with it, free to choose to love one another and to help one another, free to choose to be about the mission of following Jesus, free to bear fruit. And since one size does not fit all, we are free to continue learning just how to be free in Christ as we grow and as the world changes.

Jesus didn't promise that this would be easy. In fact, he continued to warn the disciples that the road would be hard, that they would struggle. Still, they assumed the best, not the worst, even when their actions often fell short of true discipleship. "Let these words sink into your ears", Jesus said, just a few days before the story told in today's Gospel. "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands (Luke 9:44)." The words fell on deaf ears, deaf ears that were afraid to ask what it meant.

Remember what else had come before today: Jesus had calmed storms, cast out demons, healed the sick, brought a child back to life and fed the crowds with just a couple of fish and loaves of bread. He had challenged the restrictions of working on the sabbath, and touching the dead, and dining with outsiders. Bringing the word of God and God's

healing power is central to his work restoring our relationship with God. And now, Jesus has turned his face toward Jerusalem and the culmination of his mission on earth.

Everyone signs up to follow after all these miraculous events, right? Not!

The Samaritans, for one, don't like the destination. As you have heard before, the Samaritans were the descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel that had been occupied by the Assyrians in the eighth century. Over time they had intermarried with their captors and made some changes in their worship life, including centering that life at Mt. Gerizim rather than in Jerusalem. Each group felt the other had strayed from the law handed down through Moses. They don't trust the words of this Jewish teacher, so they do not welcome him, and he moves on - although not before his disciples make the mistake of thinking that some kind of fire and brimstone punishment is needed.

It is often all too easy to dismiss those who disagree, to demean their reasoning, to demand compliance. But when we listen, as Jesus listened to those with questions or with other beliefs, we find that we are more alike than different. Those non-followers have challenges and needs, families and jobs, missing information and peer pressures. They struggle to find their way just as we, Jesus' followers, do. They may or may not be open to the good news we have to share. We are here to live out that good news anyway, to help, to serve, to love, and to leave judgment and faith to God.

Then there are those who do sign on.

There is the one who seems to think the journey is a simple trip to the city of Jerusalem...a pilgrimage perhaps, even a victory celebration, instead of the place where the temple authorities and roman rulers wait. He's not expecting a rocky road with no place to lay his head and no welcoming hosts to provide food and safety. Jesus sets him straight with the simple and disturbing fact that they will be virtually homeless: the mission will take them far away from "comfortable", far from the places they love and the people who already agree with them.

When all is going well, it's easy to be a follower of Jesus. When someone we love questions our faith it gets harder. When someone we help misuses our aid it is harder still. When destruction falls on us and our loved ones, and the world around us seems to

crumble, it is more than challenging to respond with peace and kindness, patience and love.

There are the others willing to go. They have tasks to handle first, seemingly righteous tasks, necessary even, and delays that are relatively brief. But Jesus knows how easy it is to be sidetracked by the mundane and the usual, how quick we are to say, “just a sec...in a bit...I’m gonna”. Jesus also knows that time is of the essence. The journey and its ending are relentless. They, the disciples of yesterday, and we, the disciples of today, need to pay attention. There is no time for self-indulgence, no time to waste. There is only time - and opportunity - to love one another and to follow - now.

Not all of us are called to leave behind everything we know and love to follow Jesus. Like the man released from those demons in last week’s gospel story, most of us are sent back home: back to our family and friends and community, back to live out the true freedom we are granted, right where we are.

In many ways, living by the letter of a specific law is easier: wear the uniform clothing, mark your body the prescribed way, eat the approved foods, attend the authorized meetings - check all the right boxes and you are in. And in fact, that is how the world seems to work: just ask any influencer or check any social media site , or simply look around and notice the lock step expectations of our world. You will also note, however, that those expectations regularly fail to bring the promised “Happily ever after”. They fail to fill our needs, to make us complete.

Following Jesus’ call to the freedom of living in the Spirit will not fail. It will sometimes separate us from the mainstream. It will cause us to welcome the strangers instead of locking them out, to comfort the difficult ones rather than looking the other way, to share with the ungrateful rather than withholding more for ourselves, to forgive the transgressors rather than calling down the wrath of God upon their heads, to respond with patience and self-control rather than erupt in anger when frustrated with the world around us.

We do not do these things because the law says so. We do not do these things because then God will love us. We do these things because God already loves us, and God’s only “law” is the law of love.

And, thanks be to God, we are blessed with the Spirit, who faithfully nudges us in the direction of that love, who picks us up when we fall short, and who sets us on the path that results in that fruit Paul so enthusiastically promises: peace and patience, kindness and generosity, faithfulness and gentleness, self-control and joy.

That path is the path of love.

Amen.