

“Choose Freedom”  
The Reverend Michael L. Delk  
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 8 – 27 June 2010  
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62

It’s tempting, but let’s not water down what the disciples wanted. They felt angry and hungered for vengeance. They shared a sense of urgency as they travelled toward Jerusalem, and they resented the fact that the Samaritans refused to show Jesus hospitality.

Of course, it wasn’t reasonable for them to expect Samaritans to help out a Jew, especially a Rabbi of rising popularity. The bad blood between the Samaritans and the Jewish community went back centuries. But the disciples, remembering what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah when their inhabitants were inhospitable, hoped to trigger a similar punishment for this nameless Samaritan village.

Instead of receiving permission from Jesus to bring down wrath on the offending Samaritans, the disciples got a chewing out, and the journey continued. Along the way, they met up with prospective followers, each of whom hesitated at the vital moment. One seemed deterred at the thought of life on the road with no home base. Another needed a little time to oversee the burial of his father, an important responsibility for a son, while a third only wanted a moment to say goodbye to family and friends.

Jesus was uncompromising with these prospective recruits. It’s now or never. There’s no time for hugs and kisses and promises to write; no time to sit Shiva and perform the rituals and say the prayers; no time to pack a bag or certainly don’t harbor notions of a comfy religious safari. This image of Jesus makes us uncomfortable. He seems bereft of compassion and common sense, demanding absolute commitment without condition or delay.

Is this the same Jesus who rebuked the disciples when they were frustrated? Impatient, inflexible, exhibiting a sense of urgency that would not slow down for anyone or any reason: this Jesus feels foreign and undesirable to us. Yet this Jesus offered freedom, radical freedom of a type that has intimidated people in every place and age, including ours.

To his disciples, both then and now, Jesus offers freedom from fury. Sometimes, we like being mad. It makes us feel powerful and right. The rage of indignity feeds our desire to feel superior over others, and our need to feel superior pumps up our indignant rage – a sort of perpetual motion machine that threatens to consume the soul. And we like nothing better than a convenient target to serve as the focus of our wrath.

The disciples had a clear winner in the Samaritan village. They were predisposed by prejudice built up over dozens of generations to look down on the Samaritans, and when this group sent the disciples packing, much in the same way they and their Jewish friends would have done to a scraggly pack of wandering Samaritans, the disciples were ready to make the skies rumble with heavenly fire.

This tendency toward judgment and payback is an unhealthy trait among disciples of Jesus Christ, a man who came to save so that people from the burden of judging others, so that we might be free from the futile task of seeking satisfaction in the hollow bones of revenge, free from the compulsion to settle scores. However, our knowledge of this does not make us immune to the temptation.

Our rage often bubbles on a slow boil, ready to make a mess at the slightest provocation. Good thing that Jesus sets us free from the endless cycle of getting mad and getting even. Otherwise, we might waste our lives trapped in a web of petty vendettas, unable to move forward, barely able to breathe. This is the Gospel we are summoned to share: anger may be

real, but anger need not define our reality. We are free, by the grace of Jesus Christ, to choose how we respond to provocation. We are free from prejudice that predisposes us to judgment and the desire for reprisal. We are free. Let's us enjoy it, and encourage others to do the same.

Likewise, with the prospective disciples he met on the way to Jerusalem, Jesus offered release from an ordinary everyday life. If you ever dreamed of skipping town to join the circus, or found yourself lingering without a ticket in front of an airline counter with a departure board featuring a list of mouth-wateringly exotic destinations, then you know the allure of the life that Jesus laid before these three. Each resisted, and we never find out if any of them accepted the invitation to follow Jesus and to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

They had good reasons to hesitate, and we do, too, which ought to make us refrain from the judging those three, so reluctant to seize what we know with hindsight to have been the offer of a lifetime. We have been in their place. We will be in their place, confronted with the same decision, confused by shifting priorities, overwhelmed by the conflicting commitments of family and friends when an unparalleled opportunity appears. And Jesus just keeps coming, every day in countless ways, inviting us to hit the road with him, to walk away from what seems more important so that we might find out what's really important in our lives and in our world.

Such liberty stands in stark contrast to how we usually think of freedom, namely that we are free to do what we want when we want how we want, and nobody has any right to give us grief about it. But that's not true freedom. That's a very warped, self-indulgent idea of what freedom is.

Only Jesus gives real freedom: freedom from death; freedom for renewed life; freedom to experience "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control," to borrow a list from Paul's Letter to the Galatians. And the only question worth

answering in our life, the answer from which all the other answers flow, is how will we respond to this life-altering liberation?

Do we stay, or do we go? Say yes, or say no? For each day, each person makes a decision: to forsake rage or be forged by it; to follow wisdom or ignore it; to step out of what's expected and into the unimaginable, or remain within the confines of a life that rejects adventure as too risky and inconvenient – a life of tepid faith, just seeking to get by, when Jesus wants to give us a faith that will help us and others fly.

Will we receive Jesus, or turn him away, like the Samaritans did? Will we let our rage get the better of us, or will we accept the peace of Jesus and do better than to let anger control our lives? Will we follow Jesus, or will we follow our feeble excuses as to why we can't, at least not just yet, only until after, maybe when I've managed to, etc., etc.? It's our choice, and Jesus isn't waiting. Amen.