



The Cost of Service
Michelle Mehan-Conklin, ELCA Deacon
July 4, 2021

Grace and peace to you this day. May the words of my heart be acceptable to you O God my Lord and my Redeemer. Amen.

Fourth of July falling on Sunday happens once every 7 – 8 years. I wanted to acknowledge this day as a day we celebrate our country.

What are your plans for today? Will you go on a picnic, BBQ, watch fireworks outside or if you are like Kim and myself we will watch various celebrations from the comfort of our couch keeping dogs calm from neighbors fireworks. It is good to recognize our founding day. It is a day to be celebrated. However it is not a Church holiday.

As I was thinking about this day, these scriptures and our Lutheran heritage I was reminded of Martin Luther and his work "The Freedom of a Christian."

The Freedom of a Christian is a reform document created by Martin Luther in 1520. Luther's goal was to link the ideas of spiritual freedom and servitude, and he began by laying down two seemingly contradictory principles. Luther believed the only way to freedom, and to heaven, was through faith and faith alone. ...

Luther had passion. Luther reminds of the Apostle Paul. Passionate and filled with good intentions. However I can see myself right there.....

A Christian is an utterly free man, lord of all, subject to none.

and

A Christian is an utterly dutiful man, servant of all, subject to all.

What do these words say to us in this world, in this time and place.

Note the paradox. Sound like any scriptures that make one stop and think, this does not make sense. This goes against our human logic.

Think of the beatitudes, think of the widow's mite. This line of thinking goes against what society will tell us.

What Luther proposes is that God justifies the sinner by faith alone. The sinner is changed in inner and outer man after the likeness of Christ. The Christian is at once utterly free in faith and a servant to all in works of love. Christian life is lived between these twin poles of faith and love. This is the paradoxical Christian freedom as Luther taught the church.

I appreciate how Bishop Elizabeth Eaton wrote on this subject. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther makes the case that liberation in Christ is both a freedom from and a freedom for.

How often we get our prepositions mixed up.

Here Bishop Eaton explains:

Freedom **from** is liberation from all spiritual bondage. We are set free from being trapped in ourselves, consumed by ourselves, from the belief and terror that we can and must save ourselves. That our **self** is the center of the universe. Life in Christ is not an inward-dwelling experience. We are free to get over ourselves.

Freedom **from** is liberation from the law's accusation and judgment. We are liberated from terror and despair, which are soul crushing. We are liberated from the incessant and impossible task of measuring up.

Freedom **from** liberates us from estrangement from God and God's creation. Caught in sin and standing before a God who demands righteousness when we believe that we are either responsible for or capable of affecting our own salvation, breeds resentment toward God and the objectification of others.

Freedom **for** means that in Christ we are set free to love and serve others. Freedom is a relationship, not a new set of activities or the demand of a new law. Many activists and pietists move immediately to a set of activities to define freedom, but Luther stayed with relationships. In Christ, the faithful are new creatures who are opened into newly reconciled and liberated relationships with God, with other creatures and even with oneself.

What does all of this mean to us? Where do we see the call for us today in these words? Take your pick, there are more than enough areas for us to be working for our neighbor.

[Luther](#) taught that all human beings are created in God's image and therefore are inherently good. Yet human nature is distorted because of our bondage to sin, which results in the breakdown of community and in injustices and evil. When we don't believe the amazing word proclaimed in the gospel, we spend our lives looking for substitutes to God's love. We think in our hearts: if I could get that job, or find that partner, or get straight As, or have the "perfect body" or get rid of this compulsion, then I would be happy and fulfilled.

The good news is that God's ultimate response to sin is not punishment but healing, reconciliation, and liberation. The word of God has the power to set us free and to empower us to work for the healing and liberation of creation and our neighbors.

Love begets love. It's impossible for true faith not to yield abundant fruits of love because it is by faith that we awaken to God's abundant love for us in Christ—and love wants to love.

This is how Luther expresses it:

“Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love.”

Love is the fruit of faith. Love is the mark of the true Christian.

In looking at our lessons for today we hear Paul's speaks of his affliction, his thorn of the flesh. We do not know what that ailment is. The interaction with God is open and the response from God is No. Paul says three times I appealed to the Lord that it would leave me. God's response "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." Paul's understanding.... So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. There for I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardship, persecution, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

These words from Paul are a reminder to you and me that our power does not come from ourselves. Our ability to serve and love does not come from what I can do or what I think I can do. It comes from God. In accepting that Paul was free to accept what came and live in certainty that God would see him through.

This is a reminder that we will have hard times, we will have challenges, we will face adversaries and God will see us through. God's grace will be enough. Let go of control and trust that. In believing that we become free to serve. It is hard to do in our society and world that tells us; take control, you are in control. We have choices. We choose how we act and react. We choose to be faithful. And God will see us through. We do not know how... but he will. How often do we look to others and say, oh they have it so easy, they don't have any problems. Yet that is not the case. We all have challenges, we all have problems, we all struggle. It is in how we face that challenges, problems and struggles that define who we are. Who do you and I put our trust and hope in. I tell myself when faced with a challenge, it will be ok. Even if it is not what I want, it will be ok. God will be with me and that is all I need. So, it is not that others have it easier.... It is their way of handling their challenges. I pray that I am like that. That I can say God is with me and people see that.

As we turn to the Gospel we see how Jesus was rejected from his own people, his own hometown. Can you picture the snickers and jeers..... What good can come from Nazareth..... How often do we do that to people. How often do we say, what makes them think they know it all. And if you step back it has nothing to do with that person but all about the ones making the remarks. It is their insecurities, their reflection of their self that they feel not enough so they take someone else down. We all are enough. We all are called, we all have the freedom to serve. Be bold..... Speak out. Serve selflessly.

Finally we see Jesus call his disciples to service and tell them how to go. Take only a staff, no bread, no bag, no money..... wear sandals, no extra tunic. What does that look like today? What would being sent out by Jesus look like today?

I almost break out into a sweat hearing those words. I am attached to my stuff when going out. Extra water, a notebook, my phone..... And yet, when I go out with just myself, God gives me exactly what I need. I can hide behind my stuff. I can become bogged down in the nuts and bolts.

When I am at the hospital I am reminded that I pretty much go empty handed. For a new patient, I may have a name and some facts but it is a new opportunity. And I will never forget the best advice I received was during the first week of my residency at hospice. I could barely find my way to the bathroom. A seasoned Hospice nurse came up to me in her raspy voice and said are you the new Chaplain? Yes, I stammered, knees knocking. She gets real close to me and says.... Sit down, shut up and listen. I respond..... ok.

Still to this day, best advice ever. Sit down; be present, take your time, shut up..... not about me at all. Be available to that person right there. And listen. Listen to hear, listen to understand. Listen to love. Not to respond.

If I go in free of "stuff" I am free to be present. Free to allow God to work. I can't tell you how many times I have sat with a patient and heard, thank you for listening.

God sends us out free of the things that bind us down. May we take joy and have peace in knowing that God's grace is sufficient.

May we remember that our freedoms come with responsibility.

May we be willing to serve God and in doing so serve our fellow man whatever the cost. God be with you. Amen