

# **“Spiritual Freedom” by Pat Conover**

**15 July 2012**

## **Seventh Sunday after Pentecost**

Two weeks ago I preached about Communion as the sacrament which celebrates the new covenant written on our hearts, the covenant that binds us together in Seekers, the covenant made possible by the good gifts of God , the gifts we give and the gifts we receive. I talked about the love and caring and trust that makes us who we are, the love and caring that sings the harmony of alignment with the guidance and inspiration of Jesus, the opportunities to recognize and respond to the Presence of God in every moment and situation of our lives.

Today I'm going to talk about this gift of covenant as a gift of spiritual freedom, a freedom for shared here and now salvation.

Our lectionary readings contain several examples of spiritual freedom.

We have the story of David dancing before God and wearing only an apron. It shocked one of David's wives, Michal a daughter of Saul, a trophy wife. The trophy was political, the claiming of the heritage of Saul as the first king of Isreal. Being a trophy wife was an insult to Michal and Saul and she snubbed David for his antic dancing. The story underlines David's

possession of Michal with the note that she remained childless. David wasn't worried about Michal's response. He danced with abandonment to his experience of oneness with the Spirit of God. I love it when Seekers gets gifts of embodied sacred dancing from Kate and Sheri and others.

We also have the story of John the Baptist claiming his freedom to prophetically criticize what he considered to be immoral behavior by local Herod, a puppet of Roman rule. Common sense said sit down and shut up. John stood up and told it like it was. This made Herod's wife mad and she got her revenge, where Michal did not, John's head on a plate. Exercising spiritual freedom can be dangerous when you use it to attack a king instead of being the king. What risks have you taken? What risks are you facing?

The spiritual freedom story I want to work with in this sermon is found in our lectionary reading from the Third Chapter of Ephesians. Here is my interpreted reading of the first twelve verses based on the Revised New English Bible.

I am Paul and I pray for you. I'm a prisoner now because of my work to bring the news of the gifts of God's grace to Gentiles. I received news of this gift of God to you as a revelation from God. It was a secret gift to you that was part of the gift of God through Christ. I already wrote a brief account of God's gift to you so this message is no no longer a secret..

Previous generations did not know this secret but now it is becoming known through God's apostle's and prophets. You

Gentiles are joint heirs with the Jews to the promise made known by Jesus, our Christ. I have been given the gift of God to receive this revelation and the privilege of being the one to tell you the good news.

The secret was concealed for long ages with God, the Creator of the universe, and now it is coming into the light. Through our church, the wisdom of God, in its infinite variety, is being made known throughout the heavenly realms. This was part of the purpose of God that became manifest in Jesus our Christ, our leader.

We have free access to God when we claim the confidence that grows from trusting God. (repeat twice)

It was John the Baptist, not Jesus, who first proclaimed freedom from sin, the freedom most prized by Paul. I understand the freedom taught and modeled by John and then Jesus to be much bigger than freedom from sin. Freedom from sin, carried forward in Christian tradition with the sacrament of Baptism, is important. I think the realization that the Realm of God is present, that all our moments and situations are part of the Realm of God, is far more significant. Escape from the negative only matters if we embrace what is positive. For example, giving up alcohol as an idol only becomes part of salvation if you invest the freedom from addiction in something that helps rather than hurts.

I understand the Realm of God as a secret hidden out in the open, invisible unless you recognize it. It's like nitrogen, the biggest part of the air we breath, but hard to detect

unless you look through the right “lenses.” I understand Seekers, like Paul’s church in Ephesus, to also be a “lens” for perceiving the Realm of God. We are not a lens because we are perfect. We are a lens because of the stories we carry of perceiving and responding to God as Creator, to the guidance of Jesus, to the Divine presence. We have taken individual and shared risks and learned from the results. Perceiving What Matters Most doesn’t require special revelation. It does require awareness, attention, and willingness to cross various boundaries as part of individual and shared paths as we walk the Christian Way. Lenses and maps help but when you walk you escape standpoint dependencies and gain new vantage points. Words like trust come alive.

David’s perception, his living into his calling as King of Israel, however flawed, was revelation.

John’s baptism of Jesus symbolized the Presence of the Realm of God as a dove, not just the forgiveness of sin symbolized by the water.

Paul had his ecstatic experience on the road to Damascus and ended up preaching to the Gentiles. Paul’s secret was revealed when he crossed an inner boundary, became blind to his old perspective, recognized that the grace of God is not controlled by human constructions of religious boundaries, that forgiveness opened a path to Christian community for everyone.

The importance of ecstatic speaking, vocal expression without bothering with the limits of language, permeates the gospels

and epistles. It was understood as spiritual expression. We can think of it as communicating emotional content rather than conceptual content, often as healing catharsis that leaves one feeling empty, free, clean. The ecstatic healing of Jesus and his disciples, the emotional and spiritual freedom described as the casting out of demons, can be thought of as a recentering of consciousness and sense of self, a quieting of competing inner voices.

All of these stories are stories of spiritual freedom and they sound alien to most of us. David's wild exhibitionistic dancing could be called a manic episode. John the Baptist's wild garb and diet, his attack on authority, could have gotten him labeled as a sociopath. Paul's experience could be described as a schizophrenic breakdown and his ensuing behavior described as delusions of grandeur.

Part of our clue about spiritual freedom lies in the responses of the audiences. David was a charismatic leader who gathered young men by the thousands and led them to success in battle, in hand-to-hand bloody personal battle when success is significantly grounded in morale, enthusiasm, commitment, and courage. Multitudes came out to John in the wilderness, came to Jesus in Galilee, were baptized by Peter in Jerusalem after an experience of ecstatic speech. Paul founded Gentile churches that became Christianity. However alien the stories may seem to us 2000 years later, something good was going on.

I was baptized into Christianity as a Presbyterian in a church that emphasized doing things in good order, in a church that was suspicious of emotion and passion, in a church that warned me against the dangers of Pentecostal churches that emphasized ecstatic speech and ecstatic healing. Protestant emphasis on biblical authority as a grounding for doctrine tries to put

spiritual freedom into boxes, tries to play safe.

I think of Seekers as providing a lens for seeing the Realm of God that is post-Protestant, post-Pentecostal, post-Free Church. We have navigated our path with concern for what we have been freed from and what we have been freed for: calling and accountability, the guidance of Jesus and the Divine Presence, shared leadership and responsibility, spiritual disciplines and spiritual exploration. We are refugees from religious disappointments and pilgrims who have found each other.

Two weeks ago I talked about Communion as a celebration of the new covenant written on our hearts. Covenant is what we are spiritually freed for. Salvation is what we are spiritually freed for.

We are freed for the bonds of love.

We are freed for the responsibility that comes with being trusted.

We are freed for the accountability that comes with shared leadership.

We are freed to search for the lost coin, to give the widow's mite, to discover and treasure the pearl of great price, to blossom like lilies in a field, to store up our treasures by giving them away.

We are free to show up like mustard weeds where we are not wanted,

to share our food with the multitudes,

to sow our seeds from abundance without worrying about the readiness of hard roads, the competition of thorns and thistles.

We are free to pick up the wounded from the side of road.

We are free to heal each other on Saturday, on every day.

We are free to leave our families, heal our families, make new families, ... to recognize families based on shared love and caring.

We are free to roll away stones and look into places of death.

We are free to dance with abandon.

We are free to stand up when the common wisdom is to sit down and shut up.

We are free to recognize good news in the most troubling dreams.

We are free before we are perfect, before we have our act together, ... even before we know what we are talking about.

We are free before we are ready to be free.

We are free even when others don't want us to be free.

When we make mistakes out of our freedom, and make mistakes we will, we are free to confess, repent, change, apologize, make things right, grieve ruined relationships.

The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States doesn't grant us religious freedom. It recognizes our intrinsic freedom and reduces the punishments for claiming our freedom. I'm thankful for such recognition. But the big question is whether we will recognize and claim our own religious freedom and welcome others to recognize and claim their freedom.

Are you willing to risk into your freedom? From what? For what?

Do you want Seekers to be free?



I invite you to tell someone today.

Amen