

“Degrees of Freedom”

Sermon – January 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church

Have you ever played the claw machine at an arcade? *<slide>* You know where you move a claw around until it is over the top of a toy you (or your child or your grandchild) wanted, then you drop the claw, and it grabs—nothing (except the dollar you inserted to play the game).

One of the reasons you miss more than you win is because it only has maybe three degrees of freedom. That is, you can move it around in one plane and then dropping it let’s you go in the third direction. But it is all is fairly limited and you don’t have complete control of all the actions.

But there are other degrees of freedom as well.

My wife and I have been watching an Amazon Prime mini-series called “Lawmen: Bass Reeves.” *<slide>* It’s based on a true story about a man born into slavery but becomes a freed man then years after the Civil War becomes the first African-American deputy U.S. Marshal west of the Mississippi River. *<slide>*

His actual story and accomplishments are so incredible that some have said he was the basis for the fictional lawman, the Lone Ranger—though with some adjustments in his, uh, appearance.

Over his 32 years as deputy marshal, Bass is said to have arrested more than 3,000 people and killed 14 outlaws, all without sustaining a single gun wound.

Bass worked out of what was called the “Indian Territory.” After much of it became the state of Oklahoma in 1907, though, he was removed from his position—because as a Black man, Bass was unable to continue in his position as deputy marshal under the new state laws. So much for “separate but equal.”

Tomorrow is a federal holiday celebrating the birth of Martin Luther King, Jr. *<slide>* The other night our five- and eight-year-old granddaughters told

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us they learned about him in school. We asked, “What did he do?” The younger one said, “He helped to bring justice.” The older one said, “Yeah, can you believe people were treated differently just because they had darker skin?”

I thought that was an interesting way to put it. Not “because they were black” but “because they had darker skin.”

African-American comedian Sam Adams has a very funny bit on this. At one of his shows in Nebraska a white woman asked to have a picture taken with him and as they were taking the picture, she said, “I’ve never been this close to a black man.” He responded, “I’m not black.” And her face contorted into one of utter confusion.

He goes on to say that one day he wanted to know his true color and so went down to the hardware store and compared himself to the paint chips. He said, “It turns out I’m ‘chocolate indulgence.’” What a wonderful a way to look at things; not “black” or “white” but shades of color.

Sixty years ago this July—100 years after the end of the Civil War—the Civil Rights Act was passed which prohibited discrimination in public places, provided for the integration of schools and other public facilities, and made employment discrimination illegal. It was the most sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. And Martin Luther King, Jr., among many others, were instrumental in making that happen.

Of course, women, regardless of race, still could not get a credit card in their own name and could get fired for becoming pregnant and homosexuality was just plain illegal. <slide>

Today, though, we still face racism, the tragic flaw in our nation’s character, and it has again insidiously entered mainstream politics again. This is extended, of course, to Native Americans and immigrants, particularly

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those with darker skin. And women and the LGBTQ+ community rights continue to be assaulted as well.

Many today talk about freedom and yet want laws that restrict the rights of others but not themselves. As Abraham Lincoln said, “Those who deny freedom to others, deserve it not for themselves.”

Moreover, people are increasingly promoting their personal freedom to whatever they want even if it hurts others.

But as Peter Marshall, pastor of New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington D.C. as Chaplain of the United States Senate. in the 1940s, said, “May we think of freedom, not as the right to do as we please but as the opportunity to do what is right.”

The Apostle Paul would agree. Today’s epistle from 1 Corinthians 6 starts in verse 12 of Paul apparently quoting a saying going around Corinth, “All things are lawful for me.” The implication being that because as Christians they are no longer bound to the Jewish laws, they can do anything they want with food and sex being prominent. In today’s passage it is more about the latter.

Paul’s response is “but not all things are beneficial,” and “I will not be dominated by anything.” In other words, just because you can do something doesn’t mean you should.

Paul is making the point that their freedom is bound up with their fundamental responsibility, first, to recognize their connectedness to all other believers through the vitality of the body of Christ and, second, to honor the presence of the Holy Spirit within them.

In other words, our bodies are meant to do something, namely to glorify God. The inherent relationship of the physical body to God is communicated in three ways.

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First, through creation: Paul reminds the Corinthians, “Your body ... you have from God.”

Second, through redemption: “You are not your own ... for you were bought with a price.”

And third: “Therefore, glorify God in your body.” In other words, your body’s purpose is to reflect, radiate, and resound with the glory of the loving, kind, merciful, beautiful character of God.

The issue with prostitution, as the epistle passage discusses, is that it treats the prostitute as a thing, not as a child of God. It’s not the sex per se, but it is having pleasure at the expense of another.

The point of the passage is that a believer must orient his or her life to living in a way that is in communion with Christ. The lives we live “in Christ” are not ours; Christian life is a gift of God that has been entrusted to us and for us to be good stewards of it. Thus, the Holy Spirit lives in us and therefore the life we live has to be aligned with the Giver.

As verses 19 and 20 say, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body”.

In a time where the COVID-19 pandemic continues to make us aware of the fragility of bodies, Paul’s words serve as a timely reminder that in caring for our bodies, we honor our own spiritual union with Christ, yielding authority of spirit and body to Christ’s life-giving desires for both.

Thus, caring for our bodies means keeping them healthy not just for ourselves but for our community around us. This includes preventative care, like vaccines, which keep us healthy but also our community so we trying to prevent spread of disease.

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But it also means promoting health care, including mental health, for all because each is a member of the community and if one suffers then the community suffers.

The point is to treat ourselves and others with respect. If you do something that is “good” for you but hurts or is at the expense of others, then it is not good.

The purpose of resurrection, which is at the heart of the epistle passage, is the reunification (or reconciliation) of all things to God. This is the work of God in the actual and bodily life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

We are free in Christ not to do what we want but what God would have us do.

Our bodies and our lives are dedicated to God. We are filled with the Holy Spirit to reach out and help others.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “Every genuine expression of love grows out of a consistent and total surrender to God.”

Jesus did not free us from sin so that we can do what we want for ourselves apart from others. Freedom in Christ is so we can help others realize freedom from oppression, poverty, and bigotry.

Let freedom ring—for all.

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.