

Sermon for 11 October 2020 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore  
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Scriptures: Exodus 32:1-14; Psalter: Psalm 106:1-6, 19-23; Philippians 4 :1-9 ; Matthew 22:1-14  
“Free”

We were visiting family in Texas with our young son, and we were staying with my aunt who had no children, She had volunteered to feed him in his high-chair, while we rested in the next room. “Uh-O...Now you’ve done it,” we heard her say. It became a family saying ... He’d done something, we never found out what ... but “Uh-O ... Now you’ve done it” always makes us chuckle and roll our eyes, just as today’s Old Testament reading makes us face scripture’s way of reminding us our ancestors in the faith brought trouble on themselves over and over and over.

Psalm 106 spells out the story even more explicitly. “They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass.”

How far back do we have to go to hear laughing?... the Israelites sitting around the campfire, repeating and adding to stories of faith, long before they could read and write ... and being free enough in their thinking to portray God so humanly that it took Moses’ calming to convince God not to destroy this people and start over with just him, Moses. “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them?’ Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster upon your people.”

“Talked him out of it, he did, or we wouldn’t be sitting here telling about it!” Can’t you hear them ... our faith forebears?

The other line in today’s lessons that stands out, for me, is “...when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ and he was speechless.” I don’t have a family quote for that ... but the final line, “For many are called, but few are chosen,” is strong enough, even without Matthew’s harsh “Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness...,” along with “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Free.

We say this is a free country.

We don’t have to believe anything.

Every year we get more statistics about how religion is going down in this secular age. The United Methodists just sent out an article on how few young people are going into the ministry; and here @ Bethesda we wonder along with the rest how long we will be able to stay alive, much less grow in numbers.

We're free not to wear masks, as you can see all over.

Yet we are less sure of ourselves than ever in my lifetime... don't you think?

Last week we got a set of rules for living in the wilderness...The Ten Commandments were to be practiced and practiced until the Israelites were finally ready to occupy the Promised Land.

And now here we are the next week finding just how freedom works...

We're so advanced ...so far ahead of our ancestors, or the folks who founded and built and filled these four walls!

To hear the good news of Jesus Christ, we have to learn how to bargain with this temperamental, impetuous God of ours.

Not only do we have to keep a promise ..... Covenant, the Bible calls it. "You're the boss. Nobody but you. I promise." Over and over and over, I learn that. Nothing works without that honesty. "I did it, and I'm sorry," goes a long way ... but only if you play by the rules ... if you've been raised and loved into knowing them and, more and more, keeping them .

... and then there's that wedding guest without a wedding robe ... Kingdom living is the only evidence you are welcome to God's forgiving presence in your life, isn't it? Otherwise, as my friend Fred Craddock says, "Matthew apparently is addressing a church that had lost the distinction between accepting all persons and condoning all behavior."

Free.

Surely we are called not just to hope for the future, but to work to improve the present. God's love and our responsibility are in the same package, aren't they?

"Uh-O. Now you've done it."

"Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?"

Am I being clear?

Are you all sure we should keep going?

Free.

Through Jesus Christ,

Amen.