

Sermon for 2 July 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost/Independence Day Sunday

Scriptures: Genesis 22:1-14; Psalm 136(UM746); Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

***“Freedom”***

These are not easy Bible readings.

The first has Abraham obeying God's order to sacrifice his only son, Isaac ... and then obeying the angel's order not to do so.

While the outcome is a great relief, it nevertheless shatters us all by recognizing the primitive custom of child sacrifice in God's world. Truly, human history proceeds in stages that now horrify us.

The psalm responds to this crisis by providing words of complaint to God, reminding us that honest prayer is not a polite or complimentary thing, but raw to the bone when experience calls it out.

Then we go on with the monumental Letter of Paul to the Church at Rome, which has both guided Christian belief fundamentally, and never brought total agreement to any serious grasp of the love of God through Jesus Christ...Always, Paul takes his former Jewish integrity with utmost honor and stunning reinterpretation, original persecutor par excellence of Jewish belief and actions.

Finally, in a brief summing up of a whole collection of Jesus' crucial statements, Matthew insists that the faithful disciple's smallest act will be regarded like deepest truth by the God and father of all.

And then, this is Independence Day Sunday for Americans!

Let me jump right in and read some words about freedom by Richard Rohr, a highly respected Roman Catholic theologian. In one of his daily devotions, which I sometimes share with those of you who use the internet, he describes a tour of a prison in South Africa where Nelson Mandela and other Black freedom fighters were confined, in Mandela's case for 27 years. Long, narrow, with nothing but concrete floors to sleep on and light coming dimly through a slit near the ceiling, this was their world. And guess what? One of their diversions was practicing ballroom dancing! Rohr's point was in his title: "Dance, keeping hope alive." Totally off the wall. Mandela, as we know, went on to lead South Africa in a non-violent revolution, completely unpredicted, not only because he had been plenty brutal in his pre-prison revolutionary days, but because he, along with others including Archbishop Desmond Tutu, were so insistent on non-violence and the sharing of rights and restitutions across Black and white society..

The sum of Richard Rohr's reflection is that what seems totally counter-intuitive is bedrock truth: "Even though we may not believe it, the dance, the perseverance, the light, the tenderness, the intimacy, the whole-heartedness, is already with us. Let us never forget this."

On this day when we lift up the idea of freedom in our own national pattern, we have all kinds of new evidence that we have not been just, that freedom has a great way to go before we can truthfully claim and celebrate it in America. What we have, here in this group of scriptures, and in this group of sinners gathered in the name and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, is hope, and some evidence within our own hearts, that love can dominate human society. Scars and failures abound. Change is crucial, and devotion to the neighbor's well-being is the only point of society. Don't kid ourselves with self-righteousness. Waste no time on small projects or selfish schemes. Get to work ... The center of gravity is here, where Jesus stands among us, crucified and risen.

Dance, keeping hope alive.

Amen.