

Freedom to Play

This sermon was preached by the Rev. Richmond Webster on Sunday, June 20, 2010 and is based on Galatians 3:23-29.

"For in Christ Jesus you are children of God through faith..." Galatians 3:24

Last week I was laughing with friends about the fact our bishop has been so surprised and delighted that we include in our liturgy here prayers for "all the mayors of the cities in the Birmingham area," as opposed to prayers simply for the mayor of Mountain Brook. I'm told we used to do just that; but this change was made long before I got here and it was a good and important idea.

That said, we were trying to imagine what it would be like if we were so insular that our prayers only reflected the concerns of the village outside our front door. Our Sunday prayers could go something like this:

O Lord, we beseech thee in your mercy to bring Clumpies Ice Cream back to Crestline; Lord hear our prayer...

O Lord protect those who attempt to use the crosswalk, the new one in front of CVS, formerly Ariel's, that they may not be struck by an SUV; Lord hear our prayer...

O Lord bless the police officer eating donuts on Dexter, and the lady who puts chalk on our tires, remind us that parking is free but for two hours only; Lord hear our prayer...

And as we joked about all this we then agreed there is a certain magic that comes with small places, especially this small place. A couple of weeks ago I was charmed to see two junior high school girls sitting alongside the bank on Church Street, and each playing band instrument. Their cases were open for tips, since they were the Crestline version of street musicians, and though they weren't very good I am told they made seventy bucks.

Of course we had our own money maker here at the church; this time in the form of a lemonade stand by our Day School children for the purpose of raising relief money for two churches damaged by a tornado and a flood. They raised over a thousand dollars that day, which surprised me until I heard the story of a church member who handed one of our little ones a twenty and then asked for change. "We don't give change," the child replied.

So, we play around here, and it's not just the children who know how to play; we have a playful streak running through this church, and if you want proof then look no further than this past Vacation Bible School. We have photos from the week on our website and on the video kiosks outside.

Just the other day our associate priest, Chris, told me that his son Brayden asked if "Sheriff Rich" (my VBS persona) could come home and play with him. I consider this to be the highest compliment from a child, and though I had to decline the invitation, I did tell Chris I work birthday parties...

I've been thinking of these stories and it occurs to me that there is something deeper at work than child's play here; something that points us to our high calling as members of a village church, and that something can be found in this ancient letter from St. Paul.

During our mid week Bible studies we have all pretty much agreed that in order to understand St. Paul, you have to know the story behind him. The story is simply this: In St. Paul's time the two greatest accomplishments of humankind were Roman government and Jewish religion.

The Hebrew people were known far and wide for their rigorous ethic and personal piety. Their law was their identity, and as a conquered people this Holy Law kept them set from the Roman world around them.

But one day on the road to Damascus, Paul, a Hebrew himself, met the Risen Jesus and it changed his life forever. He walked some 10,000 miles in his day, telling people like the Galatians that they too could be God's chosen people, just like the Hebrews. Jesus made all this possible for them.

Just so they didn't miss the power of this good news; just so they didn't fail to appreciate the reality of God's Amazing Grace, he told them of the gift of God's freedom; freedom to live, freedom to love, freedom to look at the sky knowing that the Creator of the Universe knows them by name, freedom even to play.

Now it is not to say that rules aren't important; in fact we need God's laws to protect us from harm and help us live whole and happy lives. In this sense the law itself is a gift. But grace becomes the lens through which we see his law and we see ourselves. St. Paul told anyone who would listen that this message of grace was more than a transfer of religion from Hebrews to Gentiles; this message of grace means we

don't need the law for our identity anymore. We have new way of seeing God and ourselves; we are the body of Christ; we are children of God.

St. Paul was careful with his words and I don't believe it was a mistake that he called us children. Jesus once took children in his lap and said that if anyone wants to see the kingdom of God, they have to see it the way a child sees it, full of wonder, full of trust, and yes, full of play.

St. Paul had another word for all this; he called it freedom.

Many deep thinkers these days have concluded that we human beings are not fully ourselves unless we are given the opportunity for love and connection. Disastrous experiments from the early part of the twentieth century proved that babies can be fed and clothed but if not held and loved they will die. The same is true for us, which gives us an explanation for so much misery these days.

We feel helpless and even alone as we watch the evening news; our beloved Gulf of Mexico is bleeding, and we can't do anything to stop it; our economy is still reeling, and suffering is widespread; our leaders are locked in gridlock, and we don't know who to trust. We have much to drive us apart, and without love and connection we too will die, if only on the inside.

This brings me back to our high calling high as a village church. In the midst of uncertainty and pain and disconnection we can come here to rest and to worship and to remember that God is near. In the midst of uncertainty and pain and disconnection we can come here to weep and feel the comfort of God's own presence. In the midst of uncertainty and pain and disconnection we can come here, to see our neighbors and friends and to remember we are not alone. In the midst of uncertainty and pain and disconnection we can come here to play. We are free to do all these things. This is our high calling.

One day last week I got caught in a thunderstorm with no umbrella. I sprinted across the parking lot, soaked to the bone and as I opened the back door of the church, a little dog slipped in beside me. She was a little pointer, a bird dog, and like me she was soaking wet. She was also shivering, though I could tell it was not from the rain but because she was deathly afraid of the thunder.

I couldn't let her stay in the halls of our building; one of our sextons is afraid of dogs and she was already hiding in the kitchen. Besides, the little dog was tracking mud across a floor that had just been cleaned, so

Edward (one of our long-time sextons) stopped what he was doing and gently shooed her out. Boom! It was thundering again, and the little dog stopped still.

And it was here, beneath the covered entrance to the back door of this church, that Edward waited beside a little dog so she wouldn't be afraid. I watched them both through the glass in the door, and what I saw was so good and kind I could swear I was on holy ground. "Don't be afraid, little girl," he said. "This storm will pass."

This is the high calling of a village church, to be a place where all God's creatures can wait for storms to pass. This is the high calling of a village church, to be a place where God's grace and goodness become the lens through which we see ourselves and the world. This is the high calling of a village church, to be a place for children to play.

We are free to do this. Play.