

Today we reflect on Jesus' story as it is given to us in the gospel of John. Jesus says to some who are attracted to him a few promising words, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." Those who listened to Jesus that day were right with him until that last phrase, "and the truth will make you free."

When you go back and look in the gospel of John you will find that as Jesus is expanding on who he is and where he comes from, there are also those who find fault with his claims and actively seek to stop him. There were those who resisted the truth about Jesus then. Today we find similar refusals to accept the truth about Jesus. Anything which keeps us separated from the love of God in Christ Jesus can be leading us to resistance. It is the nature of this love God to reflected back to God and to our neighbors. When this isn't so, we are separated.

Jewish authorities were clearly opposed to Jesus in John 7 as we read that the Pharisees and chief priests are arguing about him and what they should do with him. Some were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Their hearts were filled with fear and opposition. Still other Jews were wondering if he truly could be the Messiah. Their hearts were filled with anticipation and hope for what God was doing in their day. As we read this story we need to remember that Jesus was just a Jew speaking to Jews who were in conflict with other Jews.

In the gospel of John's approach to the good news, remaining connected to Jesus and his word is what life is all about. And more than that, this connectedness, this long term remaining, is what separates those who are really free from those who are followers of Jesus for a short time.

The overall perspective of the gospel of John is that people are in need of saving because they are separated from their Creator. This separation happens to all. This idea of seeing oneself "in need" is difficult to grasp. We are constantly working to be responsible, to be competent, to learn the latest Do It Yourself tip, to hold it all together, and then we come to worship and hear a word that says people are "in need of saving." We might respond, "Really? I am not in the grip of sin, am I?"

In other ministry sites when I have asked kids and adults to describe sin, some have been known to scratch their heads and draw a blank. I haven't asked anyone here in Eau Claire. Trusting that the scriptures are for all times and places, we may need to think about this more deeply. As we read the gospel of John it will help to be aware of the confluence of the offer of life and salvation which Jesus brings and the opposition to God in the ways of the world. In our gospel story for today Jesus names the place where the opposition resides, being slaves to sin rather than being totally committed to God.

Do we have a tendency to move away from God? Do we push God and others away? One definition of sin is whatever you do or fail to do that pushes others away, that widens the gap between you and them, and widens the gap within your own self.

Frederick Beuchner says this about sin in scripture and in everyday life:

*The sin of the Pharisee is not just a) his holier-than-thou-attitude, which pushes other people away, but b) his secret suspicion that his own holiness is deficient, too, which pushes part of himself away, and c) his possibly not so subconscious feeling that anybody who expects him to be all that holy must be a cosmic ..., which pushes Guess Who away.*

*Sex is sinful to the degree that, instead of drawing you closer to other human beings in their humanness, it unites bodies but leaves the lives inside them hungrier and more alone than before.*

*Religion and un-religion are both sinful to the degree that they widen the gap between you and the people who don't share your views.*

*The word charity illustrates the insidiousness of sin. From meaning "a free and loving gift" it has come to mean "a demeaning handout."*

*Original sin means we all originate out of a sinful world, which taints us from the word go. We all tend to make ourselves the center of the universe, pushing away centrifugally from that center everything that seems to impede its freewheeling. More even than hunger, poverty, or disease, it is what Jesus said he came to save the world from.*

Jesus did come to save the world from the power of sin. He came into the world as God the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. The authority of the fullness of grace and truth in Jesus was recognized by his contemporaries either by their being drawn to him or repelled by him. When it came down to the truth of who Jesus is, his final move was to take a stand against sin, and he stood there, in the gap, created by human sin. Out of his stance came freedom for life.

This summer I saw the documentary, "Won't you be my neighbor?" which portrays the life and work of Fred Rogers of *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*. I did not watch him as a child but knew of him and saw his program when my own children were young. His way was deliberate and perhaps slow to some critics but as an adult I was interested in what he showed when he went to places like the crayon factory or interviewed a musician like Wynton Marsalis. His natural curiosity about life and others drew children and others into his work.

His whole work was to let people know that they were loved, especially children. His work cut across barriers of race, disability, and equality. It was essential to him that children and all people felt loved and safe in relationships. His interviews with adults exhibited that same attention and care he gave to children. People who interacted with Mr. Rogers experienced his great regard for the other, for them, and his acceptance of who they were.

The authority of his love, respect and care can be seen through Roger's work on the show. You might know that Roger's earned a degree in music composition, then a theology degree and ordination in the Presbyterian Church, and finally he worked with the child development and care program at the University of Pittsburgh. He used all of these areas of study to communicate to his children audiences that they mattered.

Jesus had a certain authority which his contemporaries recognized. Parker Palmer says that we grant authority to people we perceive as "authoring" their own words and actions, people who do not speak from another's script or behave in preprogrammed ways. I think we grant authority to people who seem grounded, who have a defined self, and perhaps are so sure of their path that they appear undivided in the living of their lives. Rogers seemed to have such authority.

The documentary acknowledged the sheer will of Rogers to stick with his message. For example, he demonstrated that race should not be a barrier to respecting and accepting another as an equal human being. His first year in television children's programming set forth this principle on the day he invited

Officer Clemmons to cool his feet in the kiddie pool where Rogers himself was cooling his feet. The man who portrayed policeman Clemmons was an African American man. The year was 1968. The U.S. was filled with unrest over the equality of races.

In the news at that time was a story of a white man pouring jugs of cleaning fluid in to a public pool where African American people and others were enjoying cooling off on a summer's day. The cleaning fluid forced them out of the pool. Rogers' show of acceptance was in stark contrast to the white man who had forced the Blacks out of the pool. Officer Clemmons remained on Rogers' show for 25 years as a beloved neighbor and a respected authority figure. Some people were offended by such a show of equality and acceptance and I imagine some of them chose not to view Rogers' program. Yet the fact that Rogers persisted with his messages for decades shows he was acting out of a principle for goodness and love. He was willing to take a stand for the universality of human life. His stance gave a certain freedom to Officer Clemmons.

Such acts of non-violent yet principled life have their source in Jesus who is the only Son of God, who is close to the Father's heart. Jesus, the Son of God, makes us free by his life, his dying in our place, and by his rising from the dead and sending the Spirit of God into our broken hearts, making room from his grace and truth. It is at the confluence of our brokenness and Jesus gracious word that faith is. It is gift

All who find in themselves that they are capable of taking away another's human freedom are in the condition which results in sinning and falling short of the glory of God. But the good news is that by Jesus' stance against sin and his stance with the Father, our slavery to sin is on its way out. Being recipients of the grace of God in Christ Jesus, we are re-formed by the Word which lives in us by faith. Jesus calls us to stay connected with him, because in that we will know truth and be freed from sin and freed to be the ones God has created us, called us, and gathered us to be.

Now may the peace which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.