

This morning we heard the story about Jesus teaching with authority, and commanding demons to Be Silent, with authority. Well, I am here to tell you that I am here as his follower, without the wisdom and authority that he had. I am here to say that we are all learners, following in his way, as best we can, relying on the grace of God. This morning, amidst so much crisis in our world, I chose to focus on the letter from Paul, regarding Freedom, freedom in Christ's spirit.

We all yearn for more freedom, especially in these times of more masking and restricted social gatherings. Yet we know that in life there are always limits or restrictions on freedom. Perhaps the most famous example: You cannot yell "Fire" in a crowded theatre. You cannot have a driver's license if you have multiple D.U.I. incidents. You cannot drive 60 mph through small towns; there are sensible speed limits. You cannot blast your music outdoors at midnight if you have neighbors. And many more examples, I'm sure.

In a way it is sad that rules and laws have to be made and enforced, but they are there because there are always those who misuse their freedom with reckless extremes. Regarding freedom of speech, part of the first amendment, we know that any words used to degrade others or incite chaos or violence must be stopped. With Jesus, we will also say, "Be Silent," Stop it!

Perhaps the pandemic can teach us about the limits to freedom. We cannot simply do as we please, have large unmasked gatherings in small places. We are responsible to our neighbors and to society. The apostle Paul was teaching this in his letter to Corinth. The Corinthians were having a debate about freedom they were finding in Christ, freedom to break with some religious laws of their day. One was about meat sacrificed before some idol, an image or statue of a god. It is a rather complex example, but I'll try put it simply. Their church would say that to eat such food would be joining in the idolatry, worshipping a false God. But Paul says that it would not really be sacriligious, since this other "god" doesn't really exist, as

those with “superior” knowledge know. BUT, if he is in the company of those who might feel tainted or sacriligious, he would abstain from eating for their sake. A simple example we might all resonate with is: Of course, we are “free” to eat dessert, or consume alcohol, but if we are with those for whom sweets or alcohol is an addictive problem, for their sake, we might choose to forego our freedom and abstain!

I do resonate with Paul’s situation, since I have often gathered with people of other faiths. Once I went to a Hindu retreat at an Ashram, to see what it was all about. Some might say, “false gods, stay far away!” I felt like Paul: to me whatever “gods” or “gurus” were being honored, they were either nonexistent, or at least nonexistent to me, since I was clear about my center in Christ. Yes, I was there while food was being offered to a statue of a god, with some chanting going on. While the symbolism was strange, I did not feel “defiled” in any way. The chanting was actually rather pleasant, and I tried to find parallels with my own faith ... food offerings, like bread and wine.

Freedom. We feel free to break rules and norms if we think we have higher understanding about what makes sense. Who has not been tempted to go through a red light when no one is around, perhaps 2AM or 5AM? What sense does it make to wait minute or two at this intersection?! But for the sake of society, not to mention the chance of some friendly officer on the other side, ... we do the responsible thing and wait for the green light.

So our freedoms, our individual freedoms, ultimately are connected to and limited by our neighbors, our greater community. Paul said that greater understanding or knowledge could PUFF us up.. could make us proud, even arrogant. He pointed to Love, that BUILDS up! He said he would not eat foods offered to idols for the sake of weaker ones (for the love of others in the community, who might confuse eating the food with worshipping a false or evil god). We ask, who are the “weaker” ones in the community? Paul meant weaker in mind or conscience regarding God, but we could see Paul’s

truth regarding viruses and vaccines. Of course we should be “free” to go some places without a mask (like a trail in the woods, or perhaps anywhere 10 feet away from others But for the sake of anyone “weaker” (perhaps afraid, troubled in conscience, or more vulnerable in body), we put on or lift up the mask!

Knowledge can “puff up” (we think we alone have the answers), but Love will “build up” the whole community (all learners). Love of neighbor is the ultimate command said Jesus. Love of neighbor will always consider and respect the needs of the other, especially those who are more vulnerable, and right now with a virus and its variants on the loose, the elderly in our communities are the most vulnerable.. For their sake, for love of elderly neighbors, we will do all we can to stay physically distant and use the protection of high quality masks. Our choir sent away for special singer’s masks, that allow for some breathing(!), but are also thick material to prevent aerial spread.

One more word about knowledge, that “puffs up.” We all want to know as much as possible about this viral pandemic, so we steadily watch and read news. I also read a book, by Eula Biss, entitled “On Immunity,” about the history, science, and psychology of vaccinations. Try as we might, I think we have to admit that there will always be many unknowns, about viruses and vaccinations. So we are left finding which sources we trust most, doing the best we can, making decisions with limited knowledge. Thinking we know everything only leads to “puffed up” pride, and often some fighting over who has the real facts and truth. (Jesus said “Be Silent” to a frenzied spirit, and perhaps also can say “Be Silent” when people start name calling and demonizing people with different views.) Rather, Love builds up the community; we can do our best to listen to our neighbors with different reasoning, since they may have heard different stories about benefits and risks. Freedom is not just individual, nor based on what we think is “superior” knowledge.

What makes the community and its most vulnerable feel safe must be taken into consideration.

Love is still the greatest commandment of all, so our calling is to always consider the stories of the other, of our neighbor, especially those most vulnerable, those most affected by this health crisis, those living in crowded conditions, those with food insecurity, or job insecurity. A viral pandemic causes suffering on so many new levels for those who are already suffering! Economic poverty, poor education, and poor health too easily go hand in hand. If we follow Jesus, we will always make decisions based on how they affect the greater community, especially most vulnerable.

I'll close with a song by one of my favorite Christian singers called "I See America." Yes, in this nation, we may have thrown off tyranny from the king of England, but we created new tyrannies in its place, like driving native Americans from their lands. The Statue of Liberty is great in principle, but to brothers and sisters coming from Africa chained in slave ships, "Give me your tired and your poor," and the saying "All men are created equal" are simply jokes or lies told by those in power. One is not truly free until all are free. There is no individual freedom without respect and responsibility toward the community. Sometimes the community puts sensible restrictions on our freedoms, and sometimes we voluntarily limit our own freedom for the sake of neighbors. As Paul says, we are careful not to let our liberty become a stumbling block to the weak.

The chorus of the song says: *"I see America through the eyes of love, and long for all her people to be free. And if you see, put your hand to the job, there's work that must be done, 'til freedom's song is sung, 'til freedom's bell is rung, from sea to shining sea."*