



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick

4th Sunday after Pentecost

Sermon: "Living in God's Freedom"

Sermon Texts: Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

Buddy the beagle liked to run. He'd slip his collar and take off any chance he'd get for what he was sure he needed to experience. For those of you who heard the Toby escape story, this one's even better. And I am not a bad dog mom. One day I was at work and got a call about Buddy. It was a nice day and I had let him out on the screened in porch of our home so he could access both inside with the water bowl and be "almost outside." The ultimate dog hospitality suite. Buddy however, wanted to be "really outside." Evidence would suggest he banged his head against the latched door until he busted the latch. And then he was F-R-E-E- free! So he ran to check out all the smells in the wooded land behind our house. He ran through the woods and behind all the houses, winding his way down into town, and then out to the feed mill where the best smell in the whole wide world was. The mill made dry dog food. He was found snoozing around where giant trucks loaded up, not a good place for a squatty little beagle. A caring employee caught Buddy in a moment of snacking on feed on the ground. He tied him out back by the loading dock with a rope attached to a trash can, and called the information on his tag. I was forty minutes away so he had plenty of time to live in exile. When I got there, he looked so pitiful. Once home he slept for two straight days and I fixed a busted door. The high life of his grand adventure had taken a toll. What I wish Buddy realized was how lucky he actually was- he had a home. That hadn't always been true. His original owners had shackled him out back all the time- with no shelter for four years. Near death, he had been rescued before and given real life. Why on earth would he head off on what could have been a disastrous path?

I think that despite all of the warnings to "be good" and all that was available to him, he was lured away otherwise. On the great escape day, maybe he started small. Just a little checking out the neighbor's yard, but then, maybe a dog down the street called out, or a rabbit ran by, or the wind shifted and he smelled that tasty feed mill smell. Farther and farther, captive to his desires, he lost perspective. But, it all started with banging out that door in a big giant attitude statement of NO! to the life we offered. Why would he keep separating himself from all he had, for what he thought he had to have? Couldn't he see the effect his choices had for others?

Arguably, maybe it was crazy to believe that he would see that a whole house and a screened in porch was better than "whatever was outside." Some would say, you know how those beagles are. Of course that dog would run, after all beagles are runner-ish, enslaved to their sense of smell and desire to eat with no limit. We are speaking a language they just can't hear. Some would say, "Dogs run away all the time and make it home ok."

Now imagine that sentence with people in it. It often sounds like:

"I lived through "that" when I was growing up and I turned out just fine." Whatever "that" was involved an ordeal in there somewhere. Is "but I survived" the best we want for anyone? Is that really the standard? Paul would tell us these are not just questions for beagles. We say no to the more life giving future because sin will deceive us into imagining "yes."

Paul basically says, "Remember you have been given a new life! Raised from the dead! Sin cannot tell you how to live!" But, how often do we act like it is all a foregone conclusion?

When we end up deciding that what we do or say is "just the way it is" Or we tell ourselves it's "just fine". Or that something is just a small thing, it is no big deal, at least not to us. These are all ways of saying "no" so we can pursue what we want. Our attitude shapes our ethics. And for Buddy beagle and for us, that attitude doesn't consider how we or others will ultimately fare.

What are the things that we allow sin to dictate for us and for others? Maybe its letting others convince us to demonize a group of people. Maybe it's telling ourselves people should just be happy with something that we would find insufficient. Maybe even chafing about something as simple as wearing a fabric face mask, which may be the modern day equivalent of Jesus' example of "even just one cup of cold water to one of these little ones." It's such a little thing to do with such huge reward. I think the key comes when we pair Paul with Jesus' words in the gospel- such a small passage, but so important. When we see everyone as the "little ones" Jesus places before us. When we see it IS Jesus before us, perhaps we'll be willing to take embodying our new life more seriously.

When we allow sin, separation, to call the tune, it creates divides that just do not need to exist. Sin separates us not only from accurately seeing reality, but it separates us from seeing there is so much here worth caring about. Sin deceives us into believing our path leads to getting more, when in fact it will not. It leads us to responses like the ones I named-really just ways of saying "no" to the life God wants to usher in.

Paul is calling us to a new quality of moral life in cross in the here and now, not to saddle us with the weight of imperatives, but to free us.

“Remember how when the more you did just what you felt like doing, the worse your life became and the less freedom you had? You call that a free life? What did you get out of it? Where did it get you? You’re living in the freedom of God. All your lives you’ve let sin tell you what to do. Thank God you’ve started to listen to a new master. You must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Now, you live in God’s freedom, your lives healed and expansive in holiness.”¹. This is Eugene Peterson’s beautiful translation.

Can we move to seeing God’s vision of loving one another as expansive, not like that screen door we have to bang down?

Madeline L’Engle once said, “If we commit ourselves to one person for life, this is not, as many people think, a rejection of freedom; rather, it demands the courage to move into all the risks of freedom, and the risk of love which is permanent; into that love which is not possession but participation.”

We get to participate in such a loving relationship! In committing ourselves to follow Jesus, to love Jesus, and all “these little ones” for life, even the small things become loving. Risky, perhaps sin would argue. In reality, the framework we have been given is God’s loving and generous home. There is nothing we have to do to earn this. We can rest in that, in so many ways. And here lies the possibility of a “whole, healed, more put together life.” Right now. It often takes so little for us to choose to share what the reward of this new life looks like in the here and now in ways that feel real for everyone. How might you bear that witness?

¹ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*.