

“How to be Free in a Clutching World”

Romans 6:12-23

Genesis 22:1-14

From the Washington Post:

“Before things got out of hand, it was a typical annoyance that happens once a flight gets airborne: A passenger hit the recline button and sent his seat intimately close to the lap of the guy sitting behind him... What followed was not typical at all: a smack to the head, peacemakers diving about the cabin to intervene and a pair of Air Force F-16 fighter jets scrambling into the night skies over Washington. It happened just after a United Airlines Boeing 767 bound for Ghana with 144 passengers took off from Dulles International Airport.

Not long after the 10:44 P.M. departure for the overnight flight, the offending seat was lowered into the offended lap, and a fight ensued. A flight attendant and another passenger jumped in between, said sources familiar with the incident who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to give details.

The pilot has complete authority over the aircraft, a United spokesman said, and he decided to return to Dulles to sort thing out rather than continue the transatlantic flight to Ghana when he was unsure of the scope of the problem.”

*

As Jeff and I settled into a flight from San Francisco to Chicago, a young woman sitting next to Jeff turned her sound system up loud, loud enough so that not only she could hear it, but all of us sitting near her could hear it. Jeff quietly asked her if she could please turn the sound down a bit. “It’s a free country!” she responded, loudly.

*

What has happened to civility? Where has the ability to work things out with our fellow human beings gone? Or has there ever been “civility?” Has there ever been a time when people worked cooperatively with one another?

We have lost our freedom, folks! In claiming our rights, in looking over our shoulders at all times to make sure we are ahead of everyone else, we have lost our freedom.

Freedom is not about having everything we want, the way we want it. Freedom comes from somewhere else, entirely. Freedom does not come from always being in the right. Freedom comes from being able to let go, to give way, to allow our own right thinking to be flexible enough to allow space for someone else to have their own right thinking.

*

If only people knew what faith gives, everyone would want faith. Everyone would want to walk this journey of faith, this journey of learning to trust in a power greater than ourselves. That’s what St. Paul writes about to the Romans: “offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life... for sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.”

Let's talk about "sin." This past year I had someone tell me that I don't talk about "sin" in worship! That's not true, however! I talk about sin all the time! I don't use the word, "sin," it's true. I know, as a pastor, that if I used words like "sin," many of us here would stop listening. And that's not my goal. I want you to keep listening because I know the freedom of faith is something that can help you in your life, as it has helped me in mine. I talk about sin as "turning away," or "being separate from others and from God."

Distracted, that's another word for sin.

We all know what that is. We all know when we are distracted by life, distracted by our busy schedules, our important meetings, our thinking that we have to have what we want, others be damned. We all know what that distraction is. It's a kind of separation, separation from the godly part of ourselves.

Look around you this week. See how many people around you are distracted, distracted by doing important things. Notice when you are distracted, when you're not present in the moment. That's when you are not free; that's when you are sinning!

We are living in sin when we've lost touch with our better selves. We all do that, all the time. That's sin. In our culture, we know sin, which St. Paul names clearly in this passage from Romans, when we think we know what is best for someone, for anyone. That's when we are caught up in our thinking, in our linear thinking. Culturally, we value someone who seems to have the answers. We like a clear-thinking person who seems to know what to do next. We want answers. We want clarity.

We are also in sin when we are not free enough to allow space for someone else: someone else's head, let's say. We simply don't have the room in ourselves to allow someone else to take up some space.

Some relationships are like that: there's only space for one person! It takes some measure of freedom for two people in a relationship to allow space for more than one person. Maybe you are experiencing a place in your life where there only seems to be space for one person: your ideas, your perceptions, your wants or needs are not taken into account. We all get like that, sometimes. If you are trapped in a relationship like that, then it's to your best interest to free yourself. It's like not being able to breathe. When you are not free, you're holding your breath.

"God tested Abraham." I'm not sure God tests us. I don't buy that theology, as if God has us on a string and wants to see how far the string flies into the air. What we do know from the story of Abraham and his beloved son Isaac is that Abraham wanted to do what he thought God was calling him to do. This is an ancient, ancient story, and so much of it does not translate culturally to our time. We do not offer blood sacrifice – except in wars – in the way Abraham is asked to offer sacrifice here. And in following God, Abraham found freedom.

God did not ask Abraham to give up the one thing he loved more than anything: his son, Isaac.

By your surrender, by your letting go, by your surrender of always doing it your way – as if you knew what was best – you will be free. That's what freedom takes. Surrender, letting go. That doesn't mean not-doing – a Westerner's worst fear! – but it does mean surrendering your ego's need to see it work out your way, no matter what.

The Fourth of July is coming up. Let's be free, free people of faith, of trust, of surrender!