

## **Freed in Christ**

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2 Cor. 3:12-4:2

Transfiguration Sunday Yr. C

Think back to a time when you felt free. Was it a particular moment, a particular day, or a period of time? What did freedom feel like? Were you aware of it at the moment, or is it only in retrospect that you see that period of time as knowing freedom?

When I look back at times when I felt freedom, two particular times come to mind. The first is the day that I learned to ride a bike. I must have been 7 or 8 and for whatever reason, my neighbor Kim (who must have been 11 or 12) decided that she would be the one to teach me. I don't remember a lot of the details. I don't remember how many times I fell down. I don't remember if it happened on a single day or over the course of several days. I do remember the exact moment that Kim let go of the back of my bike and stopped running behind me. I remember slowly coasting down East Kettle Circle scared to pedal, and but even more driven to extend the ride as long as I could. I can still feel it in my body, even as I describe the scene to you today. In that moment, I knew I was free. To be totally "on my own" without anyone helping me, without those babyish training wheels, without watchful eyes, or suggestions about all the things to remember. I was just gliding over street, hovering above it, untouchable and unstoppable.

The second time in my life that I really knew freedom was in college. This experience of freedom was totally different from learning to ride a bike. There is no particular moment that I think of, no particular day, no particular year. At the time I remember having deadlines and homework, issues with money and the lack thereof, the balancing of school work, time with friends, and being on the school tennis team. In fact, it is really only in retrospect that I have an understanding of that period of time as being marked with freedom. It is only in looking back that I see how few responsibilities I really had—no car payment, no kids, no mortgage. Outside of a few basic places I had to be at certain times, I was pretty much free to do whatever I wanted. Released from the rules of my parents house, my main job was to develop my mind and to explore my curiosities. While

I had papers and reading and reports, looking back I'm still astonished at how much time I had to do whatever I wanted. The freedom represented in this time was a freedom from responsibility and a freedom to take ownership of my own life.

Today's reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians is an extremely complex one. We could spend several weeks deep in Bible study of this short passage, and we'd still only barely scratch the surface of its meaning. At the center of this text is the notion of freedom and the transformation that results from it. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit." (3:17-18).

When Paul talks about freedom that comes from the Spirit of the Lord, I think he is talking about both senses of freedom that I have just described. In one way, our experience of freedom in Christ comes like that moment I first learned to ride a bike—a complete and total sense of being released from any care or worry in the world. A sense that I could go anywhere or do anything, a sense of invincibility. A complete and total liberation from anything that might tie me down or hold me back. For many Christians this understanding of freedom is closely linked to a moment of conversion, the day the light clicked on, and we realize who we are and whose we are. We feel at the very core of our being a sense that we belong to Christ, that Jesus lived, died and was raised for us. Baptism and communion then become two of the ways that we relive that moment of complete union with God, and of the liberation that we know in Christ. The second understanding of freedom in Christ is more like my experience in college. It is only in looking back at where we've been in our faith journey, that we recognize Christ's presence in the midst of it. While we may not be able to name a particular moment or day that it happened, we have a sense that our identity has become radically redefined, and we understand in a new way who we are and whose we are. As Paul says, "when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed." God has sought us out, even as we have been searching, and when we turn to God—that is when we make our relationship with God our primary way of living in and acting in the world, then we see things in a whole new light. Things which seemed like huge roadblocks in our life become passable, struggles and

difficulties which cause us anxiety and stress become manageable, that which paralyzed us with fear no longer frighten us—we know freedom.

When I think about my own Christian journey, it reflects much more the latter understanding of freedom, rather than the former. I admit that sometimes I've lamented that I don't have a powerful conversion story to tell, that there isn't a particular moment that I can point to and say "That is the day Christ came into my life" or that "at that moment, I knew I belonged to God." And on my worse days I've questioned whether my experience of liberation is worth as much as someone who had a mountain top type of epiphany.

But what Paul reveals to us here, in this passage is that we are all works in progress, that discovering Christ, or claiming Christ, or giving ourselves over is not the end, but rather the beginning of our Christian formation. For as Paul says here, "all of us . . . are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." And what is the image we are all being transformed into? The image of Christ. That is powerful stuff. When I think of myself and my faith, I think of it in terms of following Jesus, being a disciple, or ministering in Christ's name, or in seeking to live out the Gospel as I understand it, but I don't dare think of myself as becoming more and more like Christ. But Paul says that as we see the Glory of the Lord (and most scholars agree that "Lord" here refers to God, not Jesus), that all of us with unveiled faces, seeing the Glory of God as though reflected in a mirror are being transformed into the same image (that is the icon or likeness) transformed into the same likeness from one degree of glory to another, and that this comes from the Spirit.

How would it change our understanding of our call as Christians if we truly believed, not only that we are to follow Christ, but that our transformation is to be in the likeness of Christ? That day by day we are in fact becoming more like Christ. That God is transforming us, not just to be better people, but into the image and likeness of Christ? How would we greet people differently if we believed that they might glimpse Christ in us? How would we talk to our children, or our parents differently, how would we talk to engage the stranger differently, how would we live differently if we really believed that God is transforming us, to represent—that is to re-present—Christ in the world.

It can feel like a lot, so thankfully Paul also says that this comes from the Spirit, which is to say that being transformed is something that God does within us as much as something we do within ourselves. But the

fact that God is doing the work, doesn't let us off the hook, we still have our share to do as well. We are told that it is in turning to God that the veil is removed, that it is in recognizing the Spirit that we find freedom, and that it is by God's mercy we are engaged in this ministry.

Today is the last Sunday in the season of Epiphany. The paraments are white today as we recognize the transfiguration of Christ. Today we stand on top of the mountain gazing across the valley of Lent toward the new life which comes at Easter. Lent is the perfect time to think about our relationship with God and to seek out ways of intentionally strengthening it. Lent is often thought of as a time to give something up, but that is merely one way of seeking to intentionally make God part of our everyday experience. Prayer, scripture, acts of love and service, any and all of these can aid us in our preparations to draw closer to God as we journey with Jesus to the Cross, to the tomb, and to the day of resurrection. While Lent is often thought of as a somber season in the church, it is really a time of honest reflection, and of efforts at strengthening our spiritual selves so that we can truly know the freedom which Christ offers.