

Proper 8 – C

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

An unexpected shift of attention occurred during the presidential campaign in the fall of 1988. Instead of the evening news focusing on the Democratic and Republican candidates, all eyes were on two California whales up in Alaska, trapped in a breathing hole many miles from the ocean. Strange as it may seem, Bush and Dukakis were upstaged by “Bonnett” and “Crossbeak,” the names biologists gave the whales.

It all started when the gentle giants of the sea overlooked the fact that winter arrived early that year in northern Alaska. This mistake left them trapped, stranded inland by the ever-increasing covering of solid ice that prevented them from swimming to freedom.

At first few bothered to notice – only a few compassionate Eskimos who decided the creatures needed help. In a rather primitive fashion they hauled their chain saws and dragged long poles to the site and began to gouge out ice holes, enabling the whales to breathe en route to open water. Crude, rugged and tiresome though the work was, they were determined to work their way toward the open ocean.

The weather wasn't cooperating. During some of the days, the temperature dropped below zero. That meant the small band of rescuers had to add some water-churning devices to keep the surface of the water from freezing over, especially during the screaming winds of the night. Interest in the project intensified once it caught the attention of the media. Other volunteers joined in the rescue efforts. Because the original plan wasn't moving along fast enough, in rolled an “Archimedean Screw Tractor,” an enormous eleven-ton vehicle that rode on two screw-shaped pontoons, resembling something taken from a sci-fi movie set. That clumsy behemoth would clear away the ice after it was broken up and push it aside inch by inch, slowly grinding out a pathway to the sea. But that was also too slow and tedious. Next came the National Guard, who brought in two CH-54 Skycrane helicopters that systematically dropped five-ton concrete bashers onto the ice, mile after mile, so the journey to freedom could be accelerated.

If you can believe it, the Soviets arrived next, having dispatched two of their ships to the scene. One was a mammoth twenty-ton, eleven-story-tall ice-breaker, and the other a smaller vessel with similar equipment. Interestingly, two flags flew on the stern of the Russian ships. Perhaps for the first and only time, the United States' stars and stripes flew alongside the familiar hammer and sickle. All political contrasts, economic differences, and military conflicts were set aside for this unusual mission – so a couple of whales could be free. Eureka! It finally happened at Point Barrow, Alaska. The world cheered as the exhausted creatures silently slipped out to sea.

Freedom is a wonderful thing, even for a whale. This Wednesday we will celebrate the Fourth of July, the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, declaring our political freedom. How appropriate that today we hear those

stirring words of Saint Paul: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

We know that our political freedom comes at a price. Freedom is not free as the saying goes. We know that soldiers have fought and died to maintain our freedoms. And as important as the sacrifices of our military personal are, it does not end there. We also need the work of dedicated politicians, the media, and the voters. Maintaining our freedom is the job of every citizen of our country. We all have a part to play.

Shortly after Congress passed the Emancipation Proclamation early in 1863, President Lincoln was delivering a speech. And surprisingly, he sounded much like Captain Ahab in Melville’s novel, *Moby Dick*. Lincoln had worked hard to get the Emancipation Proclamation passed, but he knew that there was still much work to do, and so he said, “We are like whalers who have been on a long chase. We have at last got the harpoon into the monster, but we must now look how we steer, or with one flop of his tail he will send us into eternity.” Lincoln knew that freedom takes a lot of work.

And Saint Paul knows the same principle applies to our spiritual freedom as well. Thus he warned the Galatians and us, “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” For freedom can be misused. So it is with political freedom and so it is with spiritual freedom. When political freedom is misused many people can suffer. Often times the person who is misusing their freedom does not suffer the consequences, or they suffer much less than the innocent victims. Of course we know that good citizenship is its own reward. And so those who abuse their freedoms are to be pitied even as we seek to bring them to justice, but unfortunately the consequences are often suffered by others.

It is not quite the same when we abuse our spiritual freedom. We may cause others to suffer as the result of our sins, but in the end it is the sinner suffers the worst consequences. It is the sinner who has separated himself from God by his thoughts and actions. Ultimately, the wise person will take seriously their obligations to both their political and their spiritual freedoms.

Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free.” This sounds rather redundant, almost nonsensical, what else would we be set free for except Freedom. But his point is that Christ has not only set us free, but also that he wants us to remain free. The yoke of slavery is always a threat to us because we have free will. We can choose to put on the yoke of slavery, and every time we sin we are doing exactly that. Jesus also talks about a yoke, his yoke. By contrast he tells us that his “yoke is easy” and his “burden is light.” But the yoke of sin is a heavy burden. It does not usually seem like that at first, but it always ends us that way, each and every time.

How do we remain free? By making the one who gave us our freedom number one in our lives. That is what the Old Testament lesson and our gospel lesson are all about. In First Kings we hear the calling of Elisha to replace Elijah. God says to Elijah, “And Elisha son of Shaphat of Able-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place.”

This is the only time in the Old Testament that a prophet designates his successor. Normally such calls come directly from God. But there is one

incident that is similar. Moses named Joshua to lead Israel after he was gone. Thus Elijah is shown to be of the same stature as Moses.

And Elijah finds Elisha plowing in a field. He throws his mantle over him. This is a symbolic act, and Elisha clearly recognizes its implications. He is ready to follow Elijah, but he has one request. He wants to say good-bye to his parents. Elijah's response is a little hard to figure out. He says, "Go back again, for what have I done to you?" I think he is saying, "Look, you're a free man, if you want to go back, go back." And the implication is if you are willing to follow me, you should be willing to follow me right now; it should be your highest priority. But Elisha goes back and slaughters the oxen and has a farewell feast. By the way, Elisha would have been plowing with just the last of the twelve yoke of oxen. The other eleven would have each had a hired man plowing with the oxen. One yoke of oxen would be plenty for anyone. And twenty-four oxen would have made a very large feast. This feast symbolizes Elisha's break with his past life. And then he goes and follows Elijah.

Our gospel reading begins the section of Luke known as the travel narrative. Previous to this, most of Jesus teaching has been about the kingdom of God. Now as he heads toward Jerusalem for the final time, he turns to the topic of discipleship, what it means to follow him. His disciples must be prepared to carry on his ministry. We must be prepared to carry on Jesus' ministry. He is counting on us, and he wants us to learn from his words about how we are to follow him.

The first thing we notice is Jesus' determination. Luke uses a rather odd phrase; at least it is one I am not familiar with. He states, "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." It turns out to be an Old Testament phrase that is typically used of someone who is sent with a message of judgment. In chapter twenty-one of Ezekiel, God tells the prophet, "Son of man set your face toward Jerusalem and preach against the sanctuaries; prophesy against the land of Israel." In chapter nineteen of Luke and again in chapter twenty-one, Jesus delivers just such a message foretelling the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple.

And whether we are familiar with the phrase or not, it certainly paints a picture of Jesus being very determined to do what needed to be done. Considering what awaiting him, he definitely needed this determination to accomplish what he was sent to do. And to follow him, we to must set our face to go wherever the Lord sends us. Jesus, even though he is God, needed to be determined to accomplish his goal. So we, who are only human, must also be determined in order to accomplish our goal of following Christ. Our goal is not as difficult as what Jesus had to endure. We could not accomplish that goal. We can accomplish the goal we are given, but we need to be focused and determined.

The disciples and Jesus are traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, and so the most direct route is through Samaria. But the Samaritans will not have him because he is headed to Jerusalem. The Samaritans believe that the proper place to worship God is on Mount Gerizim and not in Jerusalem as the Jews believe. And James and John get more than a little indignant at this slight and

want to call down fire from heaven and teach them a lesson. But Jesus will have none of it. That is not the way to follow Jesus.

The situation is very much like what we face in the Episcopal Church. The Samaritans have taken the Jewish religion and changed it to fit their own circumstances. The Episcopal Church has changed Christianity into a different religion. It is very similar, but it is not the same. There are significant differences. The Samaritan religion is very similar to Judaism, but there are significant differences.

James and John are angry at the Samaritans for not receiving Jesus and his disciples, which of course includes themselves. We are angry at the Episcopal Church for trying to change our faith from what has been handed down to us. Many of us wish God would teach them a lesson. We may not go quite so far as wishing fire from heaven upon them, but sometimes we come close to that, at least I do at times. Jesus shows us how wrong-minded that is. We cannot be his followers and wish ill upon others, even those who cause the Church great problems. We are not to hate; we are to forgive. That does not mean that we should not oppose those who teach falsehoods. We are called by God to point out those falsehoods, but we cannot follow Jesus with hate in our hearts.

Once upon a time, there was a piece of iron which was very strong. Many attempts had been made to break it but all had failed. "I'll master it," said the ax; and his blows fell heavily on the iron but every blow made his edge more blunt until it ceased to strike. "Leave it to me," said the saw; and it worked backward and forward on the iron's surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. Then it fell aside. "Ah!" said the hammer, "I knew you wouldn't succeed. I'll show you the way." But at the first fierce blow, off flew its head and iron remained as before. "Shall I try?" asked the small, soft flame? "Forget it," everyone else said. "What can you do?" But the flame curled around the iron, embraced it, and never left it until it melted under its irresistible influence. As Jesus' disciples, our mission is not to break hearts but to melt hearts – under the irresistible influence of God's infinite love.

The second half of our gospel reading is three interesting encounters between Jesus and three would-be disciples. And Jesus strangely seems to be discouraging all three of them. The one who is most eager, he warns of the hardships of being a disciple. And then Jesus rejects very reasonable requests from the other two. We should not interpret Jesus words literally. He is not saying these three are making bad requests, but rather Jesus is using the situation as an opportunity to teach us about what it means to follow him.

First is a warning that it is not easy to follow Jesus. There are conflicts. The world and the devil pull us in a different direction. There is great joy, but it doesn't come easily. Once again, freedom isn't free. And following Jesus demands our full devotion. It is more than a full-time job. It is a full-time number one priority. Just as God's love is unconditional, our discipleship must be unconditional.

Following Jesus may not be easy, but it is the best life imaginable. It is the only way to eternal life. And difficult as it is, it is a way of joy. That is our freedom in Christ. Everything else is a yoke of slavery.

The world of science has produced authoritative aero-technical tests which prove that a bumble bee cannot fly due to the shape and weight of its body in relation to total wing area. But the bumble bee doesn't know it, so it keep right on flying anyway. In this instance, at least, the bumble bee is more at one with reality than the aerodynamics experts. Likewise, in every age, Jesus' true disciples are told that the Christian ideal of life, though interesting, isn't practical. But Jesus' true disciples do not know this, so they keep on loving anyway.