

The 'Jesus Way' to Freedom

On this Independence Day weekend, the word 'freedom' has probably crossed our minds.

As US citizens, we talk about freedom in terms of the right to do as we please ... you know ... as long as it doesn't harm others ... or scare the children.

As people who put our trust in the Living God whom we meet in the Bible, we find ourselves invited into the deeper and wider freedom that the Jesus Way offers.

Today's readings show us how this freedom operates.

Two commentators led me to this insight, so I will begin by telling you who they are: the first is Cleophas J. LaRue, writing in *The Christian Century*; the other is Jill Duffield, editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*.

Their insights are so keen, and work together so well, that most of what I present to you will be their words:

Here's what Cleophas LaRue writes in *The Christian Century*:

When we compare ourselves to great people, they often seem more like us in their failures than in their successes.

So we derive encouragement from their setbacks.

Their genius and success may cause us to marvel and to question why the few appear so much more gifted than the many.

But their failures, real and imagined, imbue us with a sense of hope, courage, and even redemption. All is not lost when we fail.

The consistent witness of the New Testament is that Jesus is rejected by his own people.

He fails to work successfully among those who supposedly know and love him best.

Rejection by anyone evokes powerful emotions, but such rejection is especially painful when it comes at the hands of friends and relatives.

Mark reports that Jesus marvels at the unbelief of the people in the town where he was brought up.

(John, making note of this same rejection, says that Jesus came to his own, and his own people received him not.)

Because of this rejection, says Mark, Jesus can do no deed of power there, except that he lays his hands on a few sick people and cures them.

As Jesus prepares to extend his own ministry through the sending of the Twelve, his experience of failure and rejection seems to color his instructions to his disciples.

Along with telling them to cast out demons and heal the sick, he gives them a ritual for failure when their message is not received:

“If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.”

Shaking the dust from one's feet was a gesture used by pious Jews as they returned to Israel from a gentile land; it symbolized separation from any clinging form of defilement.

This ritual stands as a testimony before God that the townspeople have refused to hear God's word.

But it's not only what this ritual does to the townspeople; it's also what it does for the disciples:

It helps them bring closure to a failed initiative and move on.

The people of God are not to waste their resources fretting over those who will not receive the word.

Nor are they to waste their time in self-blame when things don't go as planned.

Just as Jesus acknowledges, with disappointed wonder, his rejection by his own people and then moves on to other villages, so his disciples are admonished not to tarry seeking to persuade those who refuse the message.

Move on.

This ritual for failure is no ready and easy excuse for those who want to jump ship at the first sign of difficulty and disagreement.

It is rather a symbolic act ... to be repeated as often as necessary ... that helps us go on with our work in the world in spite of failure and disappointment.

It is not a way out but a way forward.

It's not how to stop doing something;

It's how to continue doing it but under different circumstances and different arrangements.

Presbyterian Outlook Editor Jill Duffield calls this attitude the 'Jesus Way', which is also the way to true freedom.

What follows is her take on this passage:

We are burdened by things, by worry, by fear, by a paralyzing comparison of ourselves with others, by cynicism, by anger, by guilt, by so much that keeps us from the freedom Jesus offers.

This odd juxtaposition of Jesus' rejection and the sending of the twelve is a parable of discipleship: the Jesus Way is not an easy way, but it is the way to freedom.

Take note of what we are given permission to let go of when we follow Jesus.

We can let go of loneliness. We are on this Way together, inextricably bound through Christ.

We can let go of a need for power. God gives us the power we need to do the work God has given us to do.

We can let go of things. They don't confer status in God's Kingdom.

Our focus is on following Jesus and faithfully continuing his ministry of preaching, healing and teaching.

So while the Jesus Way is not an easy way, it is the only way to true freedom.

So I say to you today ... As people who put our trust in the Living God whom we meet in the Bible, we find ourselves invited into the deeper and wider freedom that the Jesus Way offers.

In order to live into this freedom, we must rely on the free gift of God's grace ...

Which will allow us to shake off the need to be accepted and the fear of being rejected ... because God has claimed, called and sent us.

If people welcome us, thanks be to God. If they don't, we can move on and allow God to work on their spirits.

The results of our efforts are entirely up to the Living God ... to whom be all praise, now and forever ...
Amen.