

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Holy Communion Sunday

August 3, 2008

“Free to Belong”

Matthew 11:28-30; 16:13-17; 28:1

Dr. David L. Gray

Here is an invitation from Jesus, which you are free to accept or decline: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” (Matthew 11:28) That invitation reminds me of “Blindsided,” a chapter in David Griebner’s book, *The Carpenter and the Unbuilder: Stories for the Spiritual Quest*.

Two persons engaged in a staring contest sit in a darkened room for some time. When a third person appears in the room where the lights have been out for some time, the contestants ask The Third Person if the opponent had blinked.

The Third Person states: “The lights have been out in this room for some time...I know a place where a light shines, which is brighter than the darkness in this room. It is brighter than the darkness between you and brighter than the darkness in you. I will take you there if you want me to.”

One contestant accepts the invitation, and after a period of time the remaining person laments, “Good try, but you can’t fool me.”

The author concludes: “I imagine he is still there, staring alone into the darkness; and all he knows for sure is that he hasn’t lost—yet.”¹

Here is Jesus’ invitation in Eugene Peterson’s translation:

“Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you will learn to live freely and lightly.”² (Matthew 11:28-30)

Jesus offers to help us deal with our problems, share our struggles, lead us in the pathway to fullness of life. We have the freedom, the opportunity to choose, to accept Jesus as our guide through this life and forever.

¹ Griebner, David M. *The Carpenter and the Unbuilder: Stories for the Spiritual Quest*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996, page 43-45.

² Peterson, Eugene H. *The Message—With Psalms and Proverbs*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1995, page 38-39.

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If someone asked you, “Who you think Jesus is?” how would you answer the person?

“A great prophet!” There is no question He was that.

“An incredible Healer!” No one would dispute that.

You are also quite free to say whatever you think and believe about Jesus Christ.

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:15-16)

Jesus replied, “God bless you, Simon. You did not get that answer out of books or from someone else but from My Father in heaven. God himself let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now, I am going to tell you who you really are: You are Peter, a rock. This is the faith on which I will put together my church...and even the gates of hell will not be able to tear it down.” (from Matthew 16:17-18)

Peter had learned that Jesus was truly the Son of the Living God and Jesus was the One to whom he could give his life. The result was a new and stronger relationship with Jesus on which others also could build. Peter’s way of using his personal freedom led him to belong to Christ.

Having the freedom to make choices does not tell us what choice we should make. This morning, we each made the choice to come here where we gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing and to worship God “with all our heart, and mind and soul and strength.”

As we turn toward God, we draw closer in understanding what it means to be part of God’s family of believers all around this amazing world. Part of what defines who we each are is this coming together to receive God’s guidance and grace in worship and praise.

Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, who has spoken from this pulpit, likens our identity in worship to a family photo album because our worship service “bears the marks of those who have gone before us.” Coming to worship also is one way other people look through the windows of our personalities and see what God is doing in our lives.

You see, your personality is our window into your world. When other people look through the window of your personality, they see what is happening in your world. Will what they see be a celebration of an abundant life of living out of God’s love and grace? Will they see inner peace and outer commitment?

Matthew 28:1 gives us a window into the personality and faith of Mary Magdalene. She and other loyal women had followed Jesus for a long time. They had remained near the cross when most of the other disciples had watched from a distance. She heard His cries

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from the cross asking God to forgive those who killed him, “for they know not what they do.” She had followed when they laid him in the unused tomb in a garden just outside the walls of Jerusalem and sealed it with the massive stone and set armed guards to watch the place.

In today’s scripture, we read, “...as it began to dawn...Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the sepulcher.” (Matthew 28:1) I am sure each of the women had reasons for going to the tomb. I focus on Mary Magdalene. In each of the Four Gospels, she is mentioned as going to the tomb early in the morning.

Mary Magdalene was free to seek the Presence of Jesus. It may have been the very first thing she did that day. All usual routines and chores could wait. As soon as the Jewish religious customs would permit, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus had been placed. She went to anoint the body but even more to be close to her crucified leader.

The only way Mary Magdalene knew to seek first the kingdom of heaven was to go, watch, and wait where Jesus had last been laid—looking, asking, waiting for an answer to her soul. Her search was only for her Lord. She was free to go. She was free to stay.

Moreover, as she waited, not knowing what to expect, she realized she was no longer alone, that Christ was standing there with her in the Garden. Her perspective on the future dramatically changed. She had come expecting to find Jesus dead and instead she met him as her Risen Lord. He was indeed Jesus the Christ!

No longer defeated and downcast, Mary rose to go and ran to tell the disciples that Christ had risen. She was alive with a joy and exuberance that carried her through the days and years ahead. She had felt hopeless. Now she had a clear sense of direction and the inner spirit to share with others. Through the window of Mary’s personality, others found themselves in the Presence of the Risen Christ.

What do people see when they look through the window of your personality? Do they see joy and peace because of your belonging to Christ?

Believers through history—from Mary Magdalene, Peter, Paul and disciples, both ancient and modern—used their individual freedom to choose to belong to God through Christ. We can do the same by accepting His invitation to follow Him.

May God grant us His grace and power to follow Him this day and every day.

Amen.