

SERMON for Pentecost 11 - August 25th, 2019.

Readings: Isaiah 58: 9b-14; Psalm 103: 1-8; Hebrews 12: 18-29; Luke 13: 10-17.

In the name of God, Source of all Being, Eternal Word and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.

Well, this was not quite the way I wanted to start my ministry here in Denmark, with a stinking cold! I apologise for not getting out and about like I hoped to do, this last week, still, we have plenty of time to get to know each other.

Thank you for your welcome as I have settled into life in this beautiful little pocket of paradise. Friday evening was a lovely time of welcome and celebration.

Many years ago, I was at a training evening for local ministers, pastors and other volunteers, for a youth event to be held for our local high school students. The team who had come down from Perth was trying to do one of those 'ice-breaker' things, trying to put us all at ease and get to know who we thought we were. They asked us to think of a word or phrase that we would want on our gravestone ... if we could only have one word or a short phrase ... something that would describe who we were and how we wanted to be remembered ... what would it be.

Well, as you can imagine, there were some very good, pious answers came from around the room. Then it got to me. My answer was "Lover" and there was this stunned, rather disapproving silence. I don't think it was my perverse nature, wanting to shock this seemingly 'holier than thou' group, but it was the truth – my truth. A lover – of God and all God's creation. Unfortunately, that explanation only earned me a look which clearly spoke 'stupid woman'!

But, isn't that what we are called to be - Lovers? It certainly was something that Bishop Ian touched on on Friday evening.

We are called to love. Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength; and to love our neighbour – anyone who isn't our self – as we would love our self.

So, if love doesn't have anything to do with who you are, we might need to do a bit of a self-check.

As you get to know me you will realise that the driving force in my life is love - love of God, love of God's creation – people, animals, the natural world. I think that is partly why being a Franciscan makes so much sense to me.

As many of you know, I was on the Pastoral Care team, at a Christian Women's Retreat last weekend. On the Friday night there was a song which included phrase: 'the overwhelming, never ending, reckless love of God'. It was something that stuck with me all weekend and all this week.

There has always been something of the extravagantly generous love which God bestows on creation – that overwhelming, never ending, reckless love of God - which fires my imagination.

I see something of this profound love of God in today's Gospel reading, but there is much more going on than meets the eye. Jesus is giving us a lesson of love based in healing and freedom.

Jesus is attending a synagogue on the Sabbath, as a guest preacher. While he was there, Jesus came across a woman with a crippling physical disability that kept her hunched right over. Jesus laid his hands on her and said, "Woman, you are now set free from what has crippled you." And sure enough, right then and there she stood up straight for the first time in eighteen years. I could imagine that pretty much everyone in the congregation was

cheering and applauding this wonderful event. The chances are that most of them had known the woman for a long time and to see her finally free was cause for great celebration.

But this isn't just the story of the woman's healing, the physical healing.

We heard the synagogue president was one of those religious leaders for whom order, and obedience were the most important way to worship God. One might think that the president would have felt honoured and pleased that this woman had been freed from her infirmity in his synagogue. But no.

All he could see was that the rules had been broken. He was so wedded to his precious rules that they had become more important than the wellbeing of his congregation. But then again, he wasn't on his own, many of the religious authorities of the time were that way inclined. The Sabbath was for the worship of God and nothing else. Everything else could wait until the following day. Unfortunately, what he couldn't see was that he was probably the person there who most needed to be healed and set free, if only he would allow it.

Jesus' message is about setting us free. It is true that our freedom in Christ is not a lawless freedom from all responsibility - on the contrary we are set free to be what God wants us to be and that will be seen in radical obedience to God. But it is also true that such a freedom to obey God cannot be codified and controlled by other people, no matter what position they occupy in the church's hierarchies. Radical obedience to God is a fruit of our freedom in Christ, not the prerequisite for it.

Again, Jesus is turning everything upside down. Not only is he healing the woman on the Sabbath, but one might ask the question, what was he doing associating with the woman in the first place! You may remember the strict social rules of the time, where unrelated men and women did not associate in public and they would also have been segregated in the synagogue.

Jesus, in God's overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love for us came to bring liberation - freedom from the rules and regulations which bind humanity, which hindered them from finding a true relationship with God and stopped them reaching their potential.

I pray that we together, may nurture an atmosphere of healing, freedom, love and faith here, where people are free to explore who they are before God and seek to deepen their relationship with God, and we may all grow and find fulfillment in becoming all that God has intended us to be.

Jesus the Christ is still healing people and setting them free; he is still meeting those who have been bound and bent over by powers beyond their control and lifting them up to new life and freedom. And if the religious leaders are threatened by that, it is they themselves who will lose out, for Jesus Christ intends to go right on healing and setting free all those who will entrust themselves to him.

May you also find yourself set free, no longer bent out of shape, knowing you also are a precious, beloved child of God, beautiful in his sight. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
25 August 2019

REFERENCES:

Based in part on sermon P12C04 with reference to Nathan Nettleton; from the sermon *To Free or not to Free* posted 26 August 2001.