

The month-long process of New Student Orientation for Ohio University ended this week. As I have done in the past, I spent about two mornings a week representing Church of the Good Shepherd at the University Interfaith Table set up in the Resource area of Orientation. This is a part of ministry that I enjoy. I enjoy being in the room with new students and their parents, and I enjoy watching them take their first steps into a new world. It's a time when many of the new students begin to realize they are about to experience a sort of freedom; freedom from their parents' household rules and family culture. I have seen some students eagerly embrace this freedom, and pull away from their parents, deciding for themselves which tables in the resource room they are going to visit, and I've seen others stay closer to their parents, relying heavily on their parent's guidance.

This year, I saw something I have never seen before. One young man came purposefully to our table, where our pitch is: we are the place to help new students connect with religious and spiritual groups on or near campus. We have an on-line form new students can fill out to help them connect to a church or group they are already affiliated with or want to learn about. Now, this particular young man walked right up to our table and started filling out the form without any conversation. However, being conversational people, we clergy and campus ministers at the table started talking to the young man, trying to find out where he was from, what church or group he was looking for. But he wasn't interested in our friendly expression, - and in a soft whisper, he asked us to be quiet. He whispered he didn't want his parents to know what he was doing, because they didn't want him to go to church. We complied, probably because we were too surprised to know what to say to that. I couldn't help be a bit impressed by this young man who had figured out he was free to make choices and the choice he was making was to find a church to attend.

This young man's response to his new-found freedom was very different from the Bishop of the Episcopal diocese of North Carolina, the Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor, who wrote in his book that he started college embracing a freedom that he thought meant he could do whatever he wanted. As a result, he ate whatever he wanted, bragging the only vegetable he consumed was the pickles on the numerous burgers he munched down. He stayed up all night going to parties and skipped classes he thought were boring. He didn't bother studying much, and he didn't even mention going to church. And while this understanding of freedom seemed fun, Bishop Taylor soon discovered it was also incredibly limiting, and if he had kept up his behavior, he would have missed something that changed his life.

That revelation happened in a literature class, where he discovered the works of English poet and cleric John Donne, which he fell in love with. That is when he discovered that college was not about the freedom to do whatever you want, it is conforming to a new set of rules and expectations. It means attending classes you don't like so that the classes you do like make better sense in the bigger picture. Those rules and regulations that aren't meant to keep you from enjoying your time at college, but to give you the freedom necessary to help you keep a balance, discover new interests, and achieve your goals. Something I believe the whispering young man who stopped by the interfaith table seems to have already figured out.

Understanding freedom from a theological standpoint, perhaps especially appropriate a few days before our country celebrates our independence and freedom, can be challenging. The freedom Paul was talking about in his letter to the Christians in a city called Galatia clearly isn't the freedom to do whatever a person wants. Following Jesus doesn't make us superior to others. The freedom or liberation of Christ is first, the freedom from death, which means even though we all will die, we don't have to fear death, and it no longer has power over us. The freedom of Christ is also freedom from feeling forced to follow the ways of greed, or power, or fear of scarcity. We don't have to stay in relationships or jobs that are abusive or toxic, and we don't have to continue or promote the abuse or toxicity. Best of all, we don't have to worry about keeping up with either the Joneses or the Kardashians, whichever one your generation knows.

But understanding the freedom of following Christ isn't just about understanding what we are free from. Like a college student starting school, it is also what we are free to do. That is what we can see happening in today's Gospel lesson. Especially the part where two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, respond to the rejection of a village in a Samaritan region of the country.

Our Gospel reading tells us that Jesus had "set his face to Jerusalem", which means he was now on the phase of his ministry that would take him to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. The wording here can indicate that Jesus is not going to have the type of ministry that is all about getting the most followers or building a big base of operations. He is going to follow God's will. Which means Jesus is not about punishing people, he is about showing God's love for all people. And sometimes that looks like letting people reject him.

Remember the people of Samaria believed themselves to be a different type of Jew, their place of worship was not Jerusalem, so they most likely rejected Jesus because of his destination. And while that rejection didn't appear to bother Jesus, James and John seemed upset by it. So much so they expressed a desire to command fire and destruction to rain down on the village. This imagery is similar to that of the prophet Elijah who in the

book of 2 Kings was said to have called down fire on people who were worshipping idols as a form of divine punishment. But Jesus was not on a triumphant march to Jerusalem. He wasn't forcing his way or battling with those who didn't recognize him or want him around. He wasn't the military messiah who was going to lead a military coup. That is not what he was about.

And stories like what we see in today's Gospel remind us how hard it was for his disciples to understand that. Anyone who has ever experienced rejection knows how painful rejection can be. It hurts. And it is all too human to want to respond to that hurt by causing the one who hurt us to feel pain. And if it can be done in a way that shows the person who hurt us was actually wrong, and a loser, then all the better. Not even the disciples of Jesus were immune from that desire. They aren't alone. You don't have to look very hard to find this behavior today. It's often in the comment section on Facebook. It's all over Twitter. It's become a form of entertainment on news programs to snarkily condemn or put down someone who disagrees with or feels hurt by someone else. There are lots of rants that are just shy of raining down fire on whomever seems like an opponent in an attempt to prove one side is right and embarrass or discredit the other. It's a form of triumphalism, which one commentator defined in the context of today's Gospel as "a subtle and short step from rejoicing in the good news of Jesus Christ to attacking and excluding those who refuse to share it."

For those who believe the freedom of Christ means the freedom to rain down anger and punishment on those who disagree with or reject you, Jesus had only a rebuke in today's Gospel. That is not what it looks like to follow Jesus. The only fire that rains down from heaven for followers of Jesus is the kind we heard about on Pentecost Sunday; it's the inspiring power of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to rejoice in and share the Good News of Jesus' liberating love, not the pain and shame of punishment.

So then, what is the freedom Jesus brings? It is the freedom to let go of those expectations of the world to be the strongest and richest and cruelest and most powerful and to learn about the love of God in Christ. It's the freedom to experience the joy of the resurrection no matter what is happening in the world, to learn to see God's loving presence in even the most unlikely of places. It's the freedom to discover no matter where we happen to be, God is there, with us, and yearns to work with us and through us to help the rest of the world see God is Love. Sometimes that will look like letting go of our desire to hurt someone who hurt us, and forgive them. Sometimes it looks like being rejected, and when we experience that rejection, to go in a different direction. Sometimes it means making a decision that will be seen as unusual or difficult for someone else to accept, but as long as it is a decision that is about the fruits of the spirit, about serving others as Jesus served, then it is important to keep following Jesus.

Jesus himself in the last part of today's Gospel spoke of how strange that might seem at times, or how challenging it can be. His words aren't meant to be discouraging, but to encourage all of us who follow him. Because he himself knows what it like to feel rejection, to show God's love even when rejected, and show us another way to live. His loving resurrection life is the foundation we can stand on when we feel discouraged or worried or afraid of the freedom we have been given. And it is that foundation that we can continue to build on through what we say, whether we whisper it or sing it or speak it, and what we do, however we share the joyful good news of Christ with the world.