

5th Sunday after Pentecost 6/27/10 2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14; Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-62
Pride Sunday

I want you to imagine for a few moments that you are not in church. And as I say a series of words, I want you to think about what each of those words mean to you – when you are not in church or not in a churchy kind of conversation. Do it as a word association; what's the first thing that pops into your mind? Here we go: righteous or righteousness; salvation or saved; sacrifice; mercy; repentance; redemption.

If we were in a small group setting, we could share our thoughts about how we use these words outside of the church setting. Which is what we did this past week at the Center for Spiritual Development's Summer Seminar, called *Speaking Christian: Redeeming Christian Language*. I'll just share with you a few of my responses. Mercy: "She threw herself at the mercy of the judge." Righteous: from cop shows, a 'righteous shoot' or 'self-righteous.' Salvation: rescue (e.g. "The loan from my friend was my salvation"). Redemption: S&H green stamps; going to the redemption center to get stuff.

I expect that you will have different answers from mine. The point is that we speak a distinctively Christian language, with words that are also used in other contexts. These words are important, central to our church language. Yet they can also be 'loaded' with a lot of baggage. In fact, in a recent study conducted with an intergenerational group, their associations with words like salvation and righteousness were overwhelmingly negative. They associated them with exclusivism, judgmentalism, and a holier-than-thou attitude.

So we've got all these big, important words. But for a large part of the unchurched or no-longer-churched, the Christian language is either meaningless or has a negative connotation. So what are we to do? We could ignore the situation, keep on using the language we've always used, and if people want to join us, they just have to learn to 'speak Christian.' Or we could reinterpret or replace words that might give an unfavorable or mistaken picture of the church's beliefs. This isn't new. Remember when we used to translate Matthew 19 as "Suffer the little children to come unto me."? The meaning of 'suffer' as 'allow' or 'permit' is no longer in use in everyday language; therefore a large part of the Christian world has decided that it too must change. And so we say, "Let the little children come to me."

This is what the presenters of the seminar, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, call redeeming our Christian language. By that they mean that we must become, in effect, bilingual. We must speak the language in positive and helpful ways within our Christian community. And –we must also speak an equivalent non-Christian (or public) language so that we can tell our story in the public arena.

I'll give you an example. This time I want you to imagine yourself right where you are – in church. But not today - some other day. You are in church. And as I say a word, I want you to think about what that word means to you – when you are in a churchy kind of conversation. What's the first thing that pops into your mind when I say 'pride'?

“. . . goeth before a fall” comes immediately to my mind. And the fact that pride, defined as 'excessive love of self' is not only one of the seven deadly sins, it is usually considered to be the original and most serious of all. Dante's definition was "love of self perverted to hatred and contempt for one's neighbor." In 1589, when each sin was paired with a demon which tempted people by means of the associated sin, the one paired with pride was Lucifer, whose desire to compete with God (pride) was what caused his fall from Heaven. Each sin was also paired with one of the seven virtues, and pride was, of course, paired with humility, the quality of being modest, reverential, even submissive, and never being arrogant, contemptuous, or rude.

If this is the language we are speaking as Christians today, we have a problem. This weekend is definitely a bilingual moment. We don't want to throw out the concept of pride as a human failing. Rather we have had to redeem it, for ourselves and for those we would hope to be a witness to.

The Civil Rights Movement taught us that “Black Is Beautiful.” The Women's Movement also helped us see that many people need pride, need to be liberated from an oppressive, forced humility and to take pride in themselves and their accomplishments. So we see bumper stickers such as “Well-Behaved Women Rarely Make History,” “Nice Girls Don't Get the Corner Office,” and “Uppity Women Unite.”

In the struggle for lgbt rights, 'pride' has become the name of the movement. According to the sfpride.org web site, “Pride has come to symbolize: the long history of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer dignity, the freedom of all people to meaningfully and proudly express their sexual and gender identities, and the commitment of LGBT people to combating oppression. From this history of rebellion grew the mission of San Francisco LGBT Pride: to educate the World, celebrate our culture, commemorate our heritage, and liberate our people.”

So I am sure that had I not given you specific instructions not to imagine yourself in church today you would have immediately gone to this meaning and not to Dante's. Pride is about liberation, freedom. And that is language we can speak to all people. This is what Paul was saying to the Galatians: “My brothers and sisters, you were called to freedom.” He begins and ends with words grace and radical freedom in Christ.

However, I'd bet that many people, as soon as they read this description of the opposition between 'flesh' and 'spirit' assume this is a dualistic view of reality that separates body from spirit, that denigrates the physical and elevates the spiritual. But that's not the case, and we must not let it detract from the message of liberation that Paul wants us to hear. For Paul 'flesh' is not only the physical body; it's that part of human nature that resists the call of God, the self that is never satisfied, never has enough status, wealth, pleasure, or whatever else it seeks.

So when he talks about "works of the flesh," he's talking not just about indulging bodily desires. Most of them are more about matters of heart, mind, and speech. They have to do with divisiveness within the community, which can be every bit as destructive as the more salacious ones. Listen to Paul's advice: "If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." It sounds like wild animals engaged in a violent struggle to the death. Self-centeredness inevitably leads to seeing others as rivals rather than beloved children of God. The resulting behavior destroys life in community.

This is why Paul tells the Galatian community that God has given them freedom, but with this freedom comes responsibilities. Perhaps 'freedom' is another one of those words that needs to be redeemed. Freedom in Christ does not mean a libertine, anything-goes life of self-indulgence. Freedom in Christ does mean freedom *from* self *for* service to others. It is the freedom in which life in community flourishes. "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Living by the spirit involves behaviors that build community and create interdependence in our churches, in our communities, in our world. Guided by the spirit, we go beyond the divisions of ethnicity, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and nation to experience the unity of all life in God's spirit. Our own self-interest expands to see the well-being of others as essential to our own well-being.

On a day like today, when we celebrate the movement that has led this expression of 'pride,' we can see how our church language can – and sometimes does – support the quest for dignity, equality, justice, and liberation. This is the message that we can take to all people. There were a lot of people at the seminar who either were never raised in a church or who had left the church. There were others who were in churches, but were looking for help in understanding and maybe redeeming some of the big words of the Christian language. Maybe we need to look at some of those words ourselves, and ask ourselves if we know what they mean, really mean in our lives. And if we don't know or we're not sure, then we need to undertake a process of exploration, so we can decide to keep them, replace them, or redeem them.

This is our calling as followers of Jesus. And it's not necessarily an easy one, as evidenced by the gospel text. But the good news is that the way of discipleship is the way of transformation – for ourselves and for our world.

As Marcus Borg put it: "Christianity is breathtakingly simple. Christianity is loving God by knowing Jesus and changing the world." And that is a message we can share – with pride.

Amen

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

This story tells how the spiritual leadership of Israel changed in the last half of the 9th century BCE. Traveling with his mentor from one holy site to another, Elisha saw Elijah taken up in a chariot of fire and picked up the older prophet's fallen mantle symbolizing that he had become Israel's leading prophet.

Now when YHWH was about to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; YHWH is sending me as far as Bethel."

But Elisha said, "As YHWH lives, and as you live, I will not leave you."

So they went down to Bethel.

Then Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; YHWH is sending me to the Jordan."

And Elisha replies, "As YHWH lives, and as you live, I will not leave you."

So the two of them went on. Fifty disciples of the company of prophets also went, and stood at some distance from them, as they both were standing by the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up, and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed on dry ground.

Once across Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you, before I am taken from you?"

Elisha replied, "Let me inherit a double share of your spirit."

"You ask a difficult thing," Elijah said, "If you see me as I am being taken from you, it will be yours; otherwise not." As they continued walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father, my father! The chariots and cavalry of Israel!" And Elisha saw nothing more. Then he grasped his own clothes and tore them apart. He picked up the cloak that had fallen from Elijah and went back and stood on the bank of the Jordan. Then he struck the water, saying, "Where is YHWH, the God of Elijah?" As he struck the water, it divided to the right and to the left, and Elisha crossed the river.

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Here the Christian ethic is writ large so that he/she who runs may read it. It is God the Spirit who gives us the basis for our ethical intentions and actual performance as Christians in the local contexts in which we live and move. Paul describes how this happens according to the choices we make about our everyday behavior.

When Christ freed us, we were meant to remain free. My brothers and sisters, you were called to freedom; but be careful, or this freedom will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Rather, serve one another in acts of love, since the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." If you go on snapping at one another and tearing each other to pieces, be careful, or you may end up destroying the whole community. Let me put it this way: if you are guided by the Spirit, you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence. Since our flesh is at odds with the Spirit – and the Spirit with our flesh – the two are so opposed that you cannot do whatever you feel like doing. If you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are obvious: lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, arguments, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and so forth. I warn you, as I have warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the realm of God. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, endurance, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against these sorts of things there is no law! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified their ego, with its passions and desires. So since we live by the Spirit, let us be guided by the Spirit.

Luke 9:51-62

Already bound for Jerusalem and the cross, Jesus decided to take the mountain route through Samaria rather than usual route to the east down the Jordan valley. As with many political and ethnic rivalries still, this enmity took on religious overtones. By Jesus' time, this hostility had lasted more than 700 years since Israel's ten northern tribes had been conquered by the Assyrians. Good Jews that they were, two of Jesus' more hot-

tempered disciples immediately gave full expression to the traditional attitude toward the Samaritans who refused them entrance to their village. James and John wanted to call down punishment on these people who rejected their beloved Master. Does this not sound familiar in our day?

As the time approached when he was to be taken from this world, Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem and sent messengers on ahead. They entered a Samaritan town to make preparations for him, but the Samaritans would not welcome Jesus because his destination was Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Rabbi, do you want us to call down fire from heaven and destroy them?" But Jesus turned and reprimanded them. Then they set off for another town.

As they were going along the road, they met a fellow traveler who said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go."

Jesus replied, "Foxes have lairs, and birds of the sky have nests; but the Chosen One has nowhere to lay his head."

To another traveler Jesus said, "Follow me."

The traveler replied, "First let me go and bury my father."

But Jesus answered, "Let the dead bury their dead; you go and proclaim the realm of God everywhere."

Another said, "I will be your follower, Rabbi, but first let me say goodbye to my people at home."

Jesus answered, "Whoever puts a hand to the plow but keeps looking back is unfit for the realm of God."