

Sermon: Year C, Proper 8

Texts: I Kings 19:15-21

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Luke 9:51-62

Nearly two thousand years after Paul wrote his short epistle to the Galatians, Karl Barth followed after him and, in the course of sixty years, he composed nearly fifteen thousand pages of theological commentary, all of which was meant to expound Paul's first proclamations of the Gospel. Even at so great a length, it was a project that was never finished – such is the depth of the Gospel and such, indeed, is the complexity of our lives. Yet in all these pages, Barth, it seemed, never tired in trying to describe the singular foundation of all Christian thought and life, which, he repeatedly claimed, is the triumph of grace in the person of Jesus Christ. Over and over, from every possible angle, in volume after volume, this was his testimony. In Jesus, God acted decisively on behalf of the whole creation, declaring us beloved, without exception, in spite of every attempt we have made – especially within the long narration of Israel's election and continual rebellion – and in spite of every attempt we make still, to deny our essential tie to God.

Late in the last volume he wrote, after more than fourteen thousand pages spent delineating this victory, Barth turned his pen toward describing some of the ills of our world that stand in opposition to God. Before he had even finished a paragraph, however, with impressive immediacy, he emphatically warned his readers that none of the coming discussion would be properly understood if any of our sins were given strength enough to thwart God's chosen reconciliation. God's Yes to us, he insisted, is indefatigable. It cannot be turned. It cannot be swayed. In so far as any of us live, our lives are secured, always, within Christ's affirmation. His resurrection is our destiny. Of course, he admitted, we are fully capable of rejecting this, of living in outright denial of God's goodness. We may, in fact, choose to literally embody evil. But, still, our evil is incapable of defeating God's own purpose. Our No can exist only as a shadow that momentarily dims God's Yes. Though real, it is false, and because it is false, it cannot endure. What endures, Barth prodded, is the love of divine embrace that refuses to let go.

With remarkable succinctness, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul had summarized the Gospel in one indelible phrase. It is fundamentally, he wrote, this exclamation and this invitation: "For freedom Christ has set us free." In turn, all of Barth's enormous output can be considered a meditation, too, on this one statement. The freedom we obtain in Christ, he said, is our opportunity to inhabit the Yes of God, to live our lives fully within the confidence that God's salvation is neither conditional nor frail. It is the truth that all of time has been set to disclose. In Christ there are no exiles, and freedom arises from this trust. There is no falling of such magnitude that we cannot be lifted up. There is no place so dark that God's light fails to pierce it. Death itself has been conquered, and therefore, we can be courageous for what is good, no matter the risks, just as we may abide in hopefulness no matter how desperate any situation appears. For we are never abandoned, and defeat is never our final word. Our final word is given us in God's only proper name: Jesus, the victorious. He has established our freedom.

At this point, however, we must be careful, for the freedom we have been given in him is not the same freedom we so blithely speak about now. We tend to hear this term as a mark of release and independence. Freedom is our being unbound. It is our ability to live for ourselves and set our own directions, unhampered and unconstrained. It is relief from oppression, as we will celebrate politically in a few days, and the elimination of every form of enslavement by which some are bent to the wills of others. Yet here Barth would note that this freedom, as honorable as it is, falls well short of the promise of God, for it is a freedom defined negatively, set in contrast with the No against which we struggle rather

than God's Yes into which we are called. This social freedom is too much of the world, partial, fragile, and, as Barth saw already in the sixties, it is a freedom that can become itself bruising and harsh, a race for goods and dominance where all the spoils go to the few who have been able to succeed against the many. Paul is especially instructive here. He notes a clear self-obsession in his list of the marks of the flesh. They all name misdirected freedoms. Fornication, licentiousness, idolatry, jealousy, anger, factions, envy, carousing: each of these share the same root, which is the tyranny of persons living for themselves alone, so that others become merely props and tools and are no longer considered as persons.

The heart of freedom, Barth countered, is not this radical independence; it's rather communion. It isn't being cut loose or self-made; it's being drawn into God's own love which extends to all of creation. In a rare moment of conciseness, Barth wrote that the "greatest freedom we have is God's desire for our prayers", unedited and unrestrained. We are called to be in constant conversation with God and the world, not only as we perceive prayer as petitions made in thought and word, but also by realizing that the very form of our lives can be our stepping evermore into the beauty of God's profound, enveloping Yes. Blessings abound, left unrecognized. God's promise awaits merely our embrace of it. As Paul directed, the freedom that makes us free is known first and always by these names: joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness. In manifesting these, we bear the image of God. We echo the goodness of God's handiwork. We show ahead of time traces of the kingdom, which is yet coming to its determined fruition. It is the freedom that binds us that sets us free.

Sounding this theme in decades worth of work, one might wonder why Barth was so quick, late in life, to so pointedly push this back to sight. He was probably, all too well aware, however, of our own tendency even as Christians to be quick in forgetfulness of the most essential things, displacing God's assurance with our own anxiety and fear and judgment. Barth was neither an ideologue nor a dreamer. He knew that too often, and too regularly, the voice of the church has been only an angry cry, pronouncing threat and banishment. For what are we known: our wide assurance or our pinched condemnations? Who do people see when they see us? Do they persons whose arms are as broad in reach as Christ's, or do they see a closed community drawn ever smaller by demands of an impossible purity? Which word to we inhabit: Yes or No, embrace or exclusion? Did God in Christ name us his beloved or do our own words of spite have dominance, even here?

For freedom Christ has set us free, Paul said. In a sense, the Gospel is this easy and this compelling. It is also this hard. And to this, Barth added hundreds of thousands of words, trying to give adequate expression to what Paul wrote in a single line. At the end, he knew that he had not yet plumbed this Yes to its rightful depth. God's grace exceeds our sin, of every form. But even more, God's grace exceeds too our capacity to rejoice and be glad, with one another and in one another. Our first testimony should be this latter open confession and this tremendous confidence, for only by means of this great Yes can we with God reconcile the world. There is no other first word: for freedom Christ has set us free.

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