

Sermon: Year C, Proper 18  
Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Philemon 1:1-20  
Luke 14:25-33

For several million young adults each year, the beginning of September means the beginning of a whole new time of unprecedented liberty. College freshmen are delivered to their respective campuses, and after a busy day of initiation and welcome, they are suddenly left on their own. Parents leave, and the schools, having doffed every pretense to acting in loco parentis, don't even try to fill that void. Suddenly, there are no curfews. No one waits up at night, rehearsing the words of the lecture that will be given when students arrive back at their rooms. There are no questions about where they have been and what they have done. For many freshmen, they have been given a freedom that they have never really experienced before. No one is looking after them – at least not directly, and therefore, they can do as they wish. Their lives, if not hidden from view, are certainly hidden from scrutiny. They can choose to be whoever they want. They can eat whatever they like, sleep as late as they choose, and direct their energies as they see fit – which isn't always applying themselves to the reputedly more mundane matters of classes and textbooks. A world of opportunities is set before them, and their independence allows them the perfect avenue for broad exploration, which often includes a sense of enjoyment unhindered by consequence, or, sometimes, more extravagantly, ventures into what can easily be called wild abandon. Ah youth!

Such freedom tempts us all: when obligations drop away, when, in the space of one day, it seems we can walk into a whole new life, when, removed from the expectations that others push upon us, we can choose to be strictly ourselves, however radical or transient that might be. This is the whole logic of the hugely successful advertising campaign for the city of Las Vegas. It's the one place in all the world, we're told, where total freedom reigns: what's done there, they say, stays there. And the implication needs no explication: one quick plane flight and you can be anyone you want. You can act out your every, any fantasy. No matter who you are or where you're from or what you do or how old you are, you can step out of your little, dull, colorless life and you can live big. You can indulge yourself. No one will know. In Las Vegas, you can be all about you.

But is this really freedom? Or is it actually only a sad form of escape – sad because what so many want to escape from is precisely themselves. Las Vegas is where you can leave everything behind, but that everything is you, all that you have become in the time you have had. What you abandon is yourself. Such fantasies are bred from unhappiness and tinged with despair. Is this freedom's best claim, momentary dreams that eventually prove false and cheap or tawdry? We exalt independence, but it can often feel too much like loneliness. Being left to oneself can spark fears of alienation. When actions have no consequences, they often have no meaning either. What, after all, does reckless abandon really provide? Wouldn't it be preferable to look at your life exactly as it is and be overwhelmed by gratitude?

It's possible that the best freedom doesn't stem from hiding something or from not being monitored or watched. The best freedom might be exactly the opposite: the joy that comes from being seen and known and the satisfaction that arises from commitments made and kept, openly and for others. Freedom can be experienced in the solace of being able to stay instead of needing to escape, when someone else clearly understands you better than you know yourself. Your harbor, then, is her or him, and your comfort is your dependence there. Sometimes our only real relief can be found when we are released from our own perceptions of ourselves and wonderfully corrected by the kinder and more perceptive eyes of friends, when we have a confidant of the highest order. Sometimes even strangers show us what we

have long forgotten, the distinctiveness of our life and the beauty of all the history that we have made of ourselves.

The best freedom isn't our individuality. It's the refinement of true community, when we actively choose to be bound to one another – in trust, first, in forgiveness when trust is violated, and, when forgiveness proves too difficult to offer, through the mediation of God in sacred love. This is freedom: the capacity to be with one another face to face, without reserve, without retaining secrets. It's far rarer and more difficult than simply launching ourselves into abandon. But it's far richer and it's constant. Apart from this intimacy, salvation means nothing. In its light, salvation means the world.

We have heard this morning almost the entirety of the letter of Paul to Philemon. It seems, at first, to be a fairly direct letter of appeal on behalf of the slave Onesimus. Unlike all the rest of Paul's letters, there is no lengthy exposition of the Gospel first. Paul doesn't include a long list of general rules for the whole church to follow. Even though the issue in question involves slavery, he makes no attempt to condemn the practice altogether. What is preserved for us in this letter is simply Paul's plea, as one friend to another, that Onesimus be allowed to return to Philemon's house as a person and not as property, that he be offered reconciliation and not threatened with punishment.

It would be easy to read this letter in the most obvious way, as Paul's request for Onesimus' freedom. Slavery is universally regarded as a great evil, and Paul, by our lights, would have had no Christian choice but to advocate for Onesimus' independence. It was, as we would say, his inalienable right.

This, however, was not the freedom to which Paul referred most. The freedom that Paul emphasized was Philemon's. It was the freedom he had to accept Onesimus back, not as a slave, and not as a free man either, but as a brother, as one bound to Philemon in love, and therefore, embraced without reserve. Their relations were no longer to be owner to possession; nor were they equal and independent persons. Paul was not demanding that Onesimus be given the legal right to walk away so that he could do whatever he wished. Paul was asking Philemon to treat Onesimus as one who was beloved, as one to whom he was essentially tied, as if he were one to whom he owed his very life.

By law, Philemon could have refused. By the measure of our own moral standards, he should have let Onesimus go, with recompense for time suffered. But Paul's efforts went further. Onesimus, he said, should be able to return as if he were the prodigal son. And Philemon should claim the freedom to stand with Onesimus face to face, immersed in all the human intimacy that this entails.

Paul referred to Onesimus as "his very heart." It's a telling phrase, and more than mere rhetoric. It was Paul's description of where he located his own identity – in someone else, in someone who, by social standing, could be abused and discarded at will. Yet he reminded Philemon, as he wrote with his own hand, that Philemon owed him his very life, too. And true freedom, he suggested, is the glad acknowledgement of these interpersonal debts and the desire, then, to live richly indebted to one another.

Before we read this letter too lightly, congratulating ourselves for already having put behind us slavery as a form of trade or commerce, we ought to consider how, in its stead, we have become slaves ourselves to trade and commerce, and the greater freedom named by Paul we have left largely untended. Much of our business has become the business of abstract charts and equations, which map projections for profitability. Executives manage systems into which people are then fitted or removed, and the deep trust is that profits themselves will ultimately be beneficent. An invisible hand will guide their just dispersal. So we believe. So

we work. So our lives are formed, if not driven. We are independent, responsible for ourselves, left to ourselves, and very little room remains, then, for celebrating others as beloved and living in the gratitude of our vast and lovely indebtedness. This is the freedom that always seems just out of reach. We have too much to do. Our love falls victim to our exhaustion – Sunday morning being a prime example of this.

Paul addresses us, however, as he did Philemon. We are encouraged to hold to a finer freedom. This is the purpose of the church, to be a community that stands as witness to community, and thereby challenges all our slavish designs with a different disposition – which is to meet face to face, seeing in every other the beauty of sacred connection. This, as Moses declared, is the real choice set before us. This is life or it is death. The freedom to decide is ours.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen