

“THREE STAGES IN WHICH LOVE GATHERS US”

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We'd better be careful with this text. For beneath appearances, it is really about freedom and love. And I can't imagine two ideas we brandish more casually--as though we truly understand them when we actually don't--than freedom and love. As someone nonchalantly tosses freedom and love around, stand back. Pretend he's juggling chain saws, not reciting poetry. It'll turn out better. For both freedom and love have been drained of real meaning and replaced with I'm not sure what.

Let's start with freedom on this Memorial Day weekend, when people have died to protect freedom. Do you remember how after we didn't find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the rationale became, "We are at war to defend and preserve freedom." I don't fully know how free they're feeling in Afghanistan and Iraq these days, but free isn't one of the words that comes to mind as I picture those places. We get in trouble as we define freedom in such disconnected and abstract ways.

So let's get specific and let darling, baptismal Sadie define freedom for us today. Freedom unfolds in three stages. We're all born dependent upon parents, family, church, friends, and neighbors to tend us. When Sadie gets out of diapers, when she can feed herself and safely cross the street, she'll outgrow her *dependence*. Steven and Rebecca, you have a long way to go but it goes faster than you think.

Around the time Sadie hits 12 or 13 she might fancy herself graduated into full *independence*. Let me ask: do we have any parents who've heard their child declare at that age, "I'm an adult. You can't tell me what to do. I decide for myself." But you see before you an 'almost adult' whose inner resources are still mostly childlike. Then they slowly figure out that clothes have fixed storage niches other than the floor; that to perform complex tasks we don't start at the last minute but break projects into smaller stages; that the world doesn't revolve around only us, but we may also consider asking others, "How are *you* feeling today, thank you?"

We become free as we survive our dependency and become more independent. The problem is there is one more stage. And in America we often stop right here. "Nobody will tell me what to do...I make my own decisions...You don't own me, I call the shots in my own life...Who are you to say what's right and what's wrong?"

Such statements, such ingrained cultural predispositions, sound independent, but are not so very free. For example, as students go to college, do they say, "I really need to 'learn something' and 'gain wisdom.'" Typically, it is, "I need to get away from parents meddling in my life." Or rarely do we hear about delaying marriage, "I am still really too immature to be a giving husband." Typically, it is, "I don't want to make a commitment to depend so much upon another. I really like my freedom."

Here's what we miss with our thin ideas of freedom. Moving out of dependence and into independence is not the highest freedom—whether political or spiritual. Interdependence is where freedom comes into full flower and we become all that God intends us to be. But we often see interdependence as little more than limiting our “I-gotta-be-me”. And that is a much greater mistake than we ever realize.

Today's gospel depicts another way. Jesus called his followers when they were clueless, clumsy fishermen and totally dependent upon him to show the way. Then after letting them look over his shoulder a couple years, he sent them out two by two into area towns, to proclaim God's new reign and to heal the broken. Jesus gave wings of independence and they were amazed by what was possible.

But in today lesson Jesus is about to depart. He is saying his goodbyes. They are naturally anxious and afraid. How can they make their music with the leader of the band gone? But Jesus doesn't leave them to their devices. He doesn't say, “I have given you enough preparation. Now you're on your own. Good luck!” No.

Beyond their spiritual apprenticing under him, he says, “I give you an Advocate who is the Holy Spirit. This Advocate is your Counselor, Comforter, and Guide.” Just like Jesus had been all of that to them and for them in their years together.

He does not leave his disciples alone, “Stand on your own feet. Be independent.” Independent isn't enough, then or now. Jesus knows they need something more. This Holy Spirit “will abide with you, and will be in you.” Meaning, they'll find power and resources equipping them for their calling as they stick together, and travel to the four corners of the earth to grow new, fledgling communities of faith.

So as the earthly body of Jesus is to ascend, the body of Christ called church is to be infused with boldness, power and life such as they never knew with Jesus. He doesn't expect them to be self-made, self-created spiritual superheroes to all. He says outright, “I will not leave you orphaned....In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” This Advocate, this Holy Spirit is received by living in community with those who welcome it, share it, and live it.

So as Jesus says, if you love me, you'll keep my commandments, he isn't sternly wagging his finger in their faces, saying, “I'm going away. You'd better be good.” Rather he's comforting them saying, “If you love me, and live out my command to love God and one another, you will find yourself equipped with all the power we ever shared ranging about together in Galilee's hills or Jerusalem's streets. And the power and sweetness of God's love will be as transforming as it always was.”

At first the disciples so depended on Jesus; he helped them up as they stumbled. Then they got on their feet and attempted forays out on their own. Now he sends them forth as community, living and loving in God's Spirit, to complete the cycle.

Dependence, independence, interdependence. As self-styled feisty Americans, whose lives belong only to us and not to God, we never reach interdependence. But in the covenant of Sadie's baptism, as the church stands with parents and godparents to promise our love, support, and care, we glimpse God's alternative.

Steve, do you recall after Sadie was born, one of our Deacons stopping by one morning with a meal? It was early in your coping with caring for *two* children now. Sadie was in her crib and you were feeding Michael breakfast. Some of his food actually found his mouth. Rebecca was still upstairs recovering from her very difficult childbirth. As our Deacon greeted you at the door, she could tell you had been doing everything for these two beautiful children, and neglecting yourself.

She smiled and spontaneously suggested you go upstairs, compose yourself, maybe rest or spend time with Rebecca. She gladly tended your two little ones. It wasn't a big deal, only half an hour. But I hope it sent a message. We are not about heroic individualism where we are supposed to independently handle it all. We are about depending on each other--parents, godparents, family, and church. Baptism, reminding us that no two parents are able to raise children alone and by themselves, reveals how interdependence is the higher freedom and holier love.

Jesus said, if you love me, and you stay accountable to God and one another, you'll have love enough for everything. Even unto the world's transforming. We love each other just as God has loved us; we perfect it living in community where vows like baptism, marriage, and confirmation are painstakingly perfected in love. That is the Christian vision of true freedom and charter of self-giving love. Amen.