

13th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

26 June, 2022

1st Reading 1 Kings 19:16B,19-21

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 16:1-2,5,7-8,9-10,11

2nd Reading Galatians 5:1,13-18

Gospel Luke 9:51-62

In a little more than a week, we will celebrate our biggest national holiday: Independence Day. It commemorates the ratification of the Declaration of Independence by the Second Continental Congress on July 4, 1776. It is a celebration of freedom: freedom for the 13 colonies from Great Britain and its external rule, freedom to become self-governing states so as to promote life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness amongst the governed.

This past Monday, we celebrated Juneteenth as a federal holiday for just the second time. This holiday commemorates June 19, 1865, when word of the Emancipation Proclamation was finally publicly announced in Galveston, Texas, the last place in the United States to do so. It had taken two-and-a-half years since the Emancipation Proclamation had first been issued (and almost 90 years since the Declaration of Independence), and the final surrender of the Confederate Army of the Trans-Mississippi on June 2, for the enslaved people of Texas to hear those words by which their government recognized them as people, and not as property. Juneteenth thus forms an essential complement to Independence Day, because in celebrating the freedom of the African Americans from slavery, it marks, though not the completion, a significant milestone towards the realization of the promise of the Declaration of Independence: that all men are created equal.

These two holidays point to freedom as the defining narrative theme of how we, as Americans, understand ourselves and our place in the world. We are the “land of the free,” the “shining city on the hill” which is a “beacon of hope” for the rest of the world. We act in the world not out of self-interest, but to promote freedom for all around the world.

Any honest assessment would have to acknowledge that as a country we do not always live up to this picture we paint of ourselves, but even in those moments where we do, when our pursuit of freedom *is* a pursuit of justice and an elimination of oppression, American freedom is a small, limited freedom. It is a freedom of the human kind and thus capable of corruption, of misuse. Freedom from others directing our life against our will, can become freedom from others, period. It can become a glorification of the individual unfettered from human bonds.

St. Paul reminds us, however, that true freedom, the freedom that Christ died to grant us, is not a freedom from people. It is a freedom for love, an opportunity for us to serve one another. True freedom does not leave us independent, unconnected to the other human beings who happen to exist in physical proximity to us. True freedom connects us to one another in a healthy and fulfilling way, in a way that echos the life of Christ in God. We become a people, brothers and sisters, a family, who are emotionally invested in one another. I serve you, I seek your good, because I love you and rejoice in what brings *you* joy. I am most free, with the freedom that Christ won for us, when I can set aside my own selfish desires. When I can live, not according to the flesh, as St. Paul would put it, but according to the Spirit. True freedom detaches me not from other people, but from myself: from my pettiness, my brokenness, my grasping need to control the things, people, and events around me. I am most truly free when I set aside myself and pursue the love of God.

It is in this light that we should understand our other two readings. Elisha demonstrates this freedom when he answers the call to follow Elijah. In slaughtering his oxen and burning his plowing equipment, he is cutting ties with his past. He will no longer be a farmer, indeed his actions foreclose that possibility. Instead, he will, like Elijah, become a radical follower of the LORD: a prophet who will proclaim the LORD's words to Israel and give witness to them by his life.

To the three potential followers, Jesus highlights the freedom needed to follow his call. To the first, he responds to the unspoken subtext. This is a follower who is prepared to follow Jesus "wherever [he] go[es]," so long as he gets his three squares and a bed. Jesus, however, demands a freedom from such earthly concerns. To follow Jesus is to rely on the hospitality, the goodness, the freedom of others, and thereby be free to show the same to them.

To the second, Jesus demands immediate action. The freedom to follow Christ is not a freedom that will come tomorrow, next week, or after some particular event has occurred. It is a freedom to act now, to proclaim the Kingdom today, to put others first trusting that Christ will provide us with what we need.

To the third, Jesus says don't look back. We are either free or we are not. There is no partial state where we are only kind-of free. If we are to embrace true freedom, then we must be prepared to be detached from those things which would prevent us from following Christ, no matter how close they might have been to us before. Even our own father and mother, if they would prevent us from choosing Christ, are chains keeping us bound, enslaved to ourselves, our desires. True freedom, the freedom of Christ, breaks those chains, allowing us to relate to each other, even our mother and father, as true children of God and followers of Christ.

The freedom of Christ is big, expansive, beyond our ability to grasp. If it was up to us, then we would not, *could not*, reach for anything more than the little American freedoms that our country so highly prizes. But it is not up to us. Jesus came down from heaven to set us free. He has *given* us his freedom, broken our chains. We don't need to find the strength within ourselves to fight for our freedom, we merely need to acknowledge the *true* source of freedom, Jesus Christ, and give thanks for this great gift. Let freedom ring.