

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence
Pentecost 3, Year C (Pride Sunday)
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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

The first openly gay American politician, Harvey Milk, once said "I have tasted freedom. And I will not give up that which I have tasted." I love that today, on a day that we set aside as Pride Sunday to honor the belovedness of all God's LGBTQIA+ children, we get an epistle reading from St. Paul on the theme of freedom. Paul tells the Church in Galatia that "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." I'd like to think Harvey Milk's quote that I started this sermon with is another way of saying what St. Paul was trying to communicate in his letter. Using the modern verbiage of Milk's quote, Paul might have said something like: "Taste the freedom of Christ. And once you have tasted it, don't ever give it up. Don't return to living as a person enslaved to anything once you have tasted freedom."

Paul goes on in our epistle reading today to define this freedom we have in Christ and tells us how we can find it and pursue it. He tells us that freedom is literally our calling. Living in freedom is central to our identity as Christians. It is our vocation. It is at the core of our faith journey. Paul also tells us that it is relational. He reminds us of the commandment Jesus gave us- that we should love our neighbor as ourselves- that when we have tasted this freedom in Christ that is our very calling, that we should love others- that we should help liberate them from the chains that bind them. Freedom is ours to claim first, but it is then something we enable others to grow into within community.

St. Paul goes on to describe some of the chains that can hold us down and keep us living lives that are enslaved. Now, keep in mind, Paul was writing to a particular audience with particular struggles and concerns and, frankly, chains. He encourages those in the Church in Galatia to set themselves free from impurity, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, and anger, and to live into the freedom of love, joy, peace, patience, and kindness. So, we might ask ourselves today: what might St. Paul tell us on this subject of freedom? what would living into this freedom look like? What chains hold us down? Perhaps shame or guilt? Feelings of inadequacy or feeling less than? Depression or anxiety? Concern for our reputation that must be untarnished and unblemished? Worry for what others might think about us if we truly lived into our own joy? What chains hold you down, keep you from living into the freedom of existing in this world exactly as God created you to be, fully embracing all that you are- a complex, beautiful, sometimes-messy, sometimes-got-it-together, beloved child of God?

If freedom is our calling, as St. Paul tells us and as Harvey Milk invites us to taste, Jesus tells us in our Gospel today of some of the risks of living into our calling most fully. Yes, I said risks. Because living into our calling, which is freedom, is risky business. Jesus tells us to live into this way of life, the life to which he calls us, might sometimes mean we end up unlike the foxes and the birds who have a place to rest their heads. Jesus also tells us that living into our calling to be free might also mean we have to leave what we know or who we know in order to fully embody freedom. This freedom to

which we have been called comes with risks and requires much of us. We all know the phrase “freedom isn’t free”. Indeed it is not.

On this Pride Sunday, I think of some queer folks I know who, embracing the freedom of living into their gay or lesbian or bi or trans identities that God so perfectly created, like the Son of Man, found themselves with no place to lay their heads- people who, after coming out, lost their families or their homes because they were bold enough to face the risk of living wholly authentic lives, embracing all that they are. On this Pride Sunday, I look to my queer siblings who preach the good news of Jesus so much more profoundly than I ever could from this pulpit. People who are rooted in their identity as beloved that nothing could or will stop them from living the lives that the creator of the Universe gave them to live.

I’ve set up a shrine here to honor two such folks who lived their lives freely, confident in their identities as beloved. The first icon is of Harvey Milk, who I quoted at the beginning of this sermon. Harvey lived his life freely and boldly as an out, gay local politician in San Francisco in the 70’s. Harvey lost his life, tragically, to the hands of an assassin who took Harvey’s life in the very office where he dedicated his life to improving the lives of his fellow citizens. The second icon here is of Matthew Shepard. Matthew embodied his calling to live into the freedom of Christ as an openly gay man, and, at the age of 21 in 1998, was a victim of a brutal hate crime. Matthew lost his life for the freedom he embraced. Matthew, an Episcopalian, a few years back, was buried in his final resting place in the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. by the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church, Gene Robinson. I had the privilege of praying at Matthew’s grave in the National Cathedral a few years back. That day and this day, I offer my thanks to God for Matthew’s life, for his courage to accept the call we all have as Christians to live into freedom. These two people are just two examples of queer folk who showed us what bravely living into the freedom to which Christ calls us can look like. And many queer folk came before them and have come after them inspiring us in our own lives to embrace freedom and authenticity and beloved identity.

Last year, I stood here preaching in this pulpit on Pride Sunday and said I was sorry to all of you queer folk who have been harmed or hurt or ostracized by the Church. And every time I get the privilege to preach a Pride sermon, I will always offer that. The Church still has much work to do still to reconcile and repair the harm it has done to queer folk. So, hear me say again, as an ordained priest in this Church, to all of my queer siblings here, I am sorry if you have been harmed by the Church. I am sorry for the times the Church has used dogma and doctrine to exclude and other you. But hear me say this, too- thank you. Thank you for showing us all what living into perfect freedom looks like. Thank you for stepping into a world every day not created for you and still showing up anyway and being you. Thank you for embodying so fully the freedom to which we are all called in Christ.

On this Pride Sunday and always may be inspired by and grateful for the queer folk in our community who, by their courage, show us more and more all of our calling to freedom. May we taste that freedom and not give up that which we have tasted. Amen.