

Sermon Note: Accept

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Introduction

Last week we began *Our Baptismal Vows*, our series on the promises of the United Methodist baptismal covenant, and we started with renunciation: turning away from the powers that diminish us. This week we consider the second promise: to accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. That freedom is God's gift, and it is given first so that we are better equipped to give ourselves to others.

Most of us would say we are in favor of justice (let justice roll down like waters), and a difficult question is how we are called to use the freedom we have been given. The prophet Isaiah speaks to a people who express their devotion by fasting and prayer, and then wonder why God seems distant. Isaiah tells them that the devotion God seeks is more about loosing the bonds of injustice, feeding the hungry, and giving shelter to those with nowhere to go. In his letter to Rome, Paul reminds a struggling church that they are children of God, and that all creation groans for the freedom that God promises. In the church today, we are called to accept the freedom we've been given and to look for concrete, public ways to use it.

Illustration Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ1ny49NDBw>

In this clip from Amazing Grace (2006), Parliament votes to abolish the British slave trade, and Lord Charles Fox rises to honor the man who gave his life to that cause.

Why This Video?

William Wilberforce was dismissed for decades in his fight to end the slave trade in Britain. When the vote is finally cast and his work is completed, it is because he used his own freedom and standing to free people he would never meet, and who could give him nothing in return. The tribute that follows shows his profound impact, and his commitment to fight evil and injustice.

Video Discussion Questions

1. For years, Wilberforce brought this cause forward and was defeated again and again before the tide finally turned. When have you stuck with something you believed in after it got hard? What do you think kept you going?
2. The same room that once brushed Wilberforce aside eventually stood to honor him. Have you ever watched someone be recognized for work that went ignored for a long time? What did you think when you saw it?
3. Wilberforce could have used his position and wealth for his own comfort. What do you think motivated him to use it to help others? When have you used something you were given for someone else's good?
4. One of the members explains that his social standing obliges him to honor the virtue of an ordinary man. When have you seen someone with power or privilege use it to lift up a person the world has overlooked?

5. When Lord Fox speaks about Wilberforce after the vote, he imagines two homecomings: one man returning in power yet unable to rest, and another going home to sleep in peace. What do you think might be the difference between the two examples? Which of these seems more appealing to you, and why?
6. The scene ends on the promise of peaceful rest, earned by a life spent in service to others. When has finishing difficult work brought you a sense of peace you could feel? What do you think made the difference?
7. With that vote, people who had no voice in that society were set free. Where do you see freedom today that someone else worked to secure? What might it look like to use your own freedom and voice for someone who can't?

Isaiah 58:6-12 (CEB)

⁶Isn't this the fast I choose:
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,
setting free the mistreated,
and breaking every yoke?

⁷Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,
covering the naked when you see them,
and not hiding from your own family?

⁸Then your light will break out like the dawn,
and you will be healed quickly.

Your own righteousness will walk before you,
and the Lord's glory will be your rear guard.

⁹Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."

If you remove the yoke from among you,
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;

¹⁰if you open your heart to the hungry,
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,
your light will shine in the darkness,
and your gloom will be like the noon.

¹¹The Lord will guide you continually
and provide for you, even in parched places.
He will rescue your bones.

You will be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water that won't run dry.

¹²They will rebuild ancient ruins on your account;
the foundations of generations past you will restore.

You will be called Mender of Broken Walls,
Restorer of Livable Streets.

Romans 8:12-25 (CEB)

¹²So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. ¹³If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But

if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. ¹⁴All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. ¹⁵You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. ¹⁷But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

¹⁸I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. ¹⁹The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. ²⁰Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice—it was the choice of the one who subjected it—but in the hope ²¹that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. ²²We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. ²³And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. ²⁴We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? ²⁵But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

Scripture Study Questions

1. Isaiah describes the devotion God asks for: releasing restraints, sharing bread, opening homes, covering the naked. How does this compare with what you've been taught? Which of these feels easiest, and which feels hardest?
2. The prophet says the worship God wants happens in the street, where the hungry are fed and the homeless are welcomed. Where have you seen faith lived out publicly like that? What made it believable to you?
3. Isaiah promises that when people live this way, their own light will break out like the dawn and they will be restored. Why do you think our own wholeness is tied so closely to how we treat others?
4. Isaiah says those who do this work will be called menders of broken walls and restorers of livable streets (verse 12). What broken places in our own community come to mind? What could mending and restoring look like in these places?
5. Paul says we have received a Spirit of adoption that lets us call God "Abba, Father," and makes us God's children and heirs. Does knowing you are a beloved child of God change the way you face what frightens you? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. Paul writes that all creation groans like a woman in labor, waiting for the freedom that is coming. Where do you hear that groaning in the world around you? Where do you hear it in your own life?
7. If creation groans like a woman in labor, would you say this means that new life is coming? If so, what do you think that new life might look like?
8. Paul says we were saved in hope, and that we wait for what we cannot yet see with patience. What is something you are still hoping and waiting for? What helps you keep hoping when you can't see results right away or fix everything all at once?

Weekly Action

This week, consider the freedom and power you already have: your time, your voice, your resources, your spirit. Prayerfully ask God this simple question: who near me is struggling right now, and what do I already have that could help them? If necessary, give it a few days and let a specific person come to mind. Decide on

one thing you can do, and consider inviting a family member or trusted spiritual partner to join you in doing it. Share the experience with someone, including how it made you feel.

Prayer

God of freedom, you break the yoke of every captive and set your people free. You give us this freedom as a gift, and you send us into the world to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves. We pray for all those who are still waiting to be free: those in poverty or slavery, those who live in fear, those treated unjustly. You give us power to act with courage for the dignity of every person. Strengthen those who lead us, watch over our neighbors, and guard all who protect our common life. Bring your healing to those who suffer and those who care for them, and have mercy on those who have been wounded by what we have done or what we have left undone. Make us bold to use the freedom and power you have given, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.