

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

“Alive in Creation: Finding Freedom”

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Exodus 32:1-6; Matthew 22:34-40

I am taking a quick poll this morning. It is about which of three classrooms in which you would prefer to study; all of which by the way are real classrooms that I have been in. I will call the first classroom, the chaos classroom. The children are running all over the room with none sitting at their desks. There is trash on the floor and everything is in disorder. Larger children are taking things from smaller ones. The teacher is engaged in an argument with one child while all the rest are going wild. That is classroom one. The second classroom I will call the Trunchbull' classroom (remember the book Matilda?). The classroom is silent. The kindergarteners are in their desks, all looking intently at the teacher and the wooden ruler in her hand. As she walks around the classroom not a word is uttered unless a child raises their hand and is called on. Any extra sound results in the quick “thwack” of the ruler on their hands. That is classroom number two. The third classroom I will call the organized but fun classroom. The room is relatively quiet. Everything is in its place. Some children are on the floor reading. Others are speaking with the teacher. There is a sense of organized, but caring calm. So, which will it be? Classroom one with total chaos, classroom two with the ruler or classroom number three with a sense of calm and learning? OK, most of you chose classroom number three, which would have been my choice; which is what makes our Exodus story this morning so interesting. They chose the classroom of chaos over the other two. Let me explain.

The Israelites had been slaves for four hundred years. God, with the help of Moses had set them free. They traveled into the wilderness to Mt. Sinai. Once they arrived, Moses went up on the mountain and received from God the first portion of the Law. This first portion contained the Ten Commandments among other laws. Moses read the rules, if you will, to the people and the people signed off on following them. So far, so good. Next, Moses needed to return to the mountain to get a new set of laws. While he was gone, the people began to get a bit itchy. Even though Moses had a substitute leader in the room, Aaron, the people began to get out of control. Finally, they demanded that Aaron make them a new God, which he did. In the process they ignored all of the laws or rules, which Moses had brought from God. Then they went wild. The word in the text is that they partied or reveled. The Hebrew makes it clear that this describes a scene of utter chaos, very much like classroom number one. So the question becomes, why did they make that choice? Why did they choose chaos over order?

What I want to offer to you this morning is that I believe that they did it because they wanted freedom. Again, let's return to the overarching story. These people had been slaves for four hundred years. They had had people telling them what to do every day of their lives. There were rules about when to get up and when to go to bed. There were rules about how long they had to work, how they had to work and what they did after work. In a sense it was like being in prison where there are rules that govern virtually everything you do. Suddenly though, they were free. God had sprung them from their prison

and set them on a path to freedom and adventure. You can imagine how this was both thrilling and frightening; thrilling they were free, and frightening, what do we do now. But then almost as soon as they were free, Moses brings down these new rules; new rules from a God they had never really known. Rules that once again appeared to tell them what to do and how to do it. They were tired of rules. They were tired of being told what to do. So the instant they could throw off these rules they did. In so doing they believed that they would finally be free; free to live and die as they chose. The only problem was that throwing off God's rules didn't lead to freedom, but to chaos, which believe it or not has its own set of rules.

The reality of life is that there are always rules. Sometimes the rules may be written down, such as classroom rules. Other times the rules are simply social norms that insure society functions; like my parents insuring my brothers and I learned to say "yes sir" and yes ma'am." The issue then for the Israelites, and for us is under which set of rules will we choose to live.

First we could choose to live under the rules of chaos. Remember I said chaos has rules. Those rules are: Only the strong survive. Every person for themselves. The stronger dominate the weaker. The mob has the power. No one is safe. This was the choice that the Israelite people were making. They were returning to the Book of Genesis; to Cain and Able, to the people before Noah, to the tower of Babel. They saw it as freedom, but in reality they were choosing classroom number one; a place in which there was fear, uncertainty, bullying and very little personal growth. While on the outside it may look appealing (look, we are free to do what we want) the end result is a place in which few of us would really want to live.

Second, we could choose to live under Pharaoh's rules. These were the rules under which the Israelites had lived for four hundred years. Those were the rules of domination, in which one person, or one class, the ruling class, made all the rules and those rules benefited no one other than the rule makers. Those rules were intended to insure not only the dominance of the rule makers but the utter de-humanization of the Israelites. The Israelites were not to be treated as human beings but as things to be used. They were to be referred to as slaves and not a people. They were like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, where he had no name but was simply prisoner 24601. The issue here for us is not only that we might be treated this way, but we may end up treating others this way; through how we refer to them (those people) or treat them (hey you...as if they had no name). Though this set of rules is not one under which most of us would want to live, it is one that is still prevalent in the world today.

Third we could choose to live under God's rules. These were rules based in God's infinite love for the people whom God had called. These were rules that gave boundaries for living; rules that protected the weak and vulnerable; that insured that God's good gifts were fairly shared; that called upon people to help their neighbors; that called upon people to orient their lives toward God, not out of abject fear (remember the teacher's ruler) but out of response for the love of God that set them free from slavery. These were the rules that allowed the people to grow and flourish. These were the rules that insured that every human being was seen as someone in whom the image of God lived. These were the rules of freedom. And it does so because the law becomes not simply a set of rules, but a life orientation in which every human being can grow and thrive because they are loving God and loving neighbor.

If you want to know what it looks like to live under God's rules you have to look no further than what took place at our church yesterday. Yesterday was church clean-up day. And as with every church clean-up day we were joined by people who had been required by courts to spend time in community service. One of the frequent comments from these people was how much they enjoyed working with us (not for us). They enjoyed working with us, they said, because we treated them like friends. We learned their names. We fed them lunch. At other churches where they worked they were treated, in their words, "like criminals." This is how God's rules work, that we see every human being as a child of God in which the image of God is present.

We choose. Each day, we choose which set of rules we want to live under in our lives, in our church and in our world. Jesus invites us to choose the way of God's rules; the rules that can be summed up in loving God and loving neighbor. For it is in these rules that we find our freedom; our freedom to become the people God has made us to be. My challenge to you on this day is to ask yourselves, how am I finding freedom by loving God and neighbor?