

Living as the Freed

Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

This year has been my most challenging at Greenville College so far. I think my time here has done a good job of showing me that just when I think I know something, I've really only realized I know nothing. I've learned so much I feel I have learned nothing at all. I feel as though my Psychology/Religion diploma will only read, "I can't even hope to know." I found myself consumed by: what do you do when you see truth in multiple yet conflicting areas? Where did I get my dispositions? How do they need to change? How do we live a life that exudes both holiness and humanity? How do I understand the incarnation, Jesus Christ, who lived this very life? In the end I found myself sitting in my bathroom closet, helplessly asking my hanging clothes, "How do you live life?" My clothes didn't really answer... perhaps they thought it was self-explanatory. I mean they do just hang there all day until I (or one of my roommates) decide to take them out for a walk. That small closet has been my own little hermit cove. It's pretty much the room of requirement. Heard of it? If you've read Harry Potter, you have. This little cove of requirement is exactly the cove required when I need it, and however I need it. Sometimes that includes a yellow bean bag, sometimes that includes midnight snacks, sometimes that includes the celestial tunes of Ludovico Einaudi, and sometimes that includes space to finger paint. That closet has been a sanctuary midst the chaos of my own mind.

I have finally accepted that my mind can be read by a simple observation of my room, and all other areas in apartment 207, really. Those are some gracious ladies who still allow me to live there. Thank you, Olivia Huber and Haley Fahrner, for allowing my paints, canvas boards, scribbled notes, notes about my notes, lists, my glue gun, and all other things to clutter not only my spaces in our room, but also yours. And never losing patience with me for stepping on your toes during this perpetual dance.

It has been during this year that I remembered that I could forget who God was. In "spiritual winter" I couldn't remember what God I had been introduced to. Was He still the same? Why the chilly separation? Could I still depend on my Father? Who am I in relation to Him anymore?

Here is what seems to be applicable: we live a life dependent on relationship. All we experience exists in the realm of relationship. I can observe that when I eat sea salt and olive oil flat bread crisps, my relationship with them is very utilitarian. I utilize their tastiness to serve a purpose in relation to what I believe would please me. Sometimes I put pieces of provolone cheese on top of these crackers just to spice up the relationship a bit. My relationship to my family looks different now than it did when I was living at home. My relationship with my family looks different than it does with my friends. If I lose a friend, the relationship changes. I don't all of a sudden fall out of relationship with them, I instead am in a *different* relationship to them. In this way, even lack of relationship is still standing in relationship. The pattern seems to be, not all relationship is the same, but right relationship for each thing does exist. Living to be in right relationship with those around us requires us to know who we are and how we stand in relation to God, creation, and others. I would submit that this is what we can receive from our texts this morning—that we have been freed into a relationship with God through Christ's sacrifice. After the life and death and resurrection of Christ, humanity now has the ability to live into this freedom of being committed to our relationship with God. We choose to seek out right relationship with God and who we are in relation to the rest of our world. Scripture has accumulated authors' messages on what believers should be about, what good fruit they should produce, how to live in relation to impurity, pride, neighbors, and God. Scripture gives us words for what it looks like, through our believing lens, to live in right relationship. Yet before the authors of scripture can expect their hearers and readers to understand messages for living in right relationship, the receivers need to understand

who they are. So, being a Psychology/Religion major, here is where I must express the importance of an individual knowing who they are as an individual, as well as who they are in a community.

Identity is a tricky, tricky thing—tricky because it can feel like we are running on a hamster wheel. What we identify with informs our developing identity, yet what we identify with is a result of our developing identity. This gets quite circular.

We begin to encounter identity from the very beginning of our relationship with the world. As a young yahoo it began when I noticed I had fingers and limbs. I could control how I moved; heavens, I could even walk if I wanted! I also began to realize the power I wielded. I had the power to refuse to eat unless I was in my bouncer. Age three marked an impactful time of realizing that I was just the kind of kid who wanted to wear a bucket on my head. I discovered prison in the requirement to bathe, and I found freedom in running out into the open air without any of my hindering clothes. My identity truly was forming. My family relocated from our Trinity Christian College to a small town in Northern Illinois. I was five years old and my world was crashing. I knew who I was, what I liked to do, and who the people were around me in my home on this campus. How could I leave this place? What playground would ever suffice again? How could I accept this change? Well, I wasn't about to choose a happy existence. I was determined to be miserable. My relationship to change was one of misery.

Whether we realize it or not we, as humans, search for identity. There are personal identities and collective identities, who we are as individuals and who we are communally. Identities can exclude or include. We engage with the scavenger hunt of identity by collecting: where our family makes its home, the culture of the community around us, gender, religion, social status, race, ethnicity, genealogy, language, friends, media, and traditions. Community identities are informed by the shared values, beliefs, and concerns of the community. These things inform us of our individuality, or how we know ourselves and express ourselves in each given situation. They can endure for generations or change over time and in new situations. Human beings grow through their experiences with new environments. We emerge from our chrysalis each time a new relationship to life is processed. Our limbs grow longer and stronger, our minds more capable of predicting the patterns of life. We continue to wrestle with identity. This is important because we interact with all of life through standing in our place on the map first. Our vision of the stars depends on where we stand in relation to all other parts of the universe. This is the function of identity. It is the lens through which we see.

Ah, but a problem surfaces. As we strive to know who we are we encounter this thing of fear. There are a myriad of ways we respond to fear, but the psychological workings of that are for another time. In short, we can end up functioning out of fear by letting it be the thing that motivates us. The more we fear, the more we cling. We cling to this way of dressing, these types of clothes. We cling to that kind of food and this amount of it. We cling to this music. We cling to other people's words of affirmation. We cling to that which is familiar. Sometimes we cling to suffering. Sometimes we cling to a happy disposition. We cling to knowledge. We cling to our beliefs. We cling to our things, we cling to our comfort, and we cling to what we have determined we need. We cling in such a way that by being driven *by* fear we essentially cling *to* fear. We struggle to find salvation by chaining ourselves to the things that seem to speak freedom to us. Little do we realize that we are making ourselves dependent on an unsustainable freedom. It isn't true freedom at all. It's a freedom to fall again into separation from right relationship to our surroundings. Our identity becomes what we idolize.

So how do we then embrace our identity, yet through yearning to follow Christ give up identity? How do we take up the identity of a believer of Jesus, yet not idolize it?

Let's allow a little Scripture to reveal what it looks like for those whose identity is in Christ. It says our Father is a good God and Holy King; we are co-creators with Him; we are male and female and all images of God. We are co-heirs with Christ; we are brothers and sister and neighbors to each other; we are bound for the Kingdom of God. Because of these things we are, we live as a creation of relation (I love alliterations and rhyming, I'm an active advocate). We live in celebration and tension with the world we encounter. We live as one who does not quickly judge, but instead focuses to understand; we are one who stewards well (1 Corinthians 12 and 13). We live as one who gives glory to God in all we do (10:23-33). We live in the tension of paradox (2 Corinthians 6), as one who produces good fruit (Galatians 5:22). We live as burden sharers (Galatians 6). We live as parts of a bigger whole (Ephesians 2:4), and we live newly (4:25, 5:2). We are seekers of holiness. We are bearers of freedom. We are free.

These are the things we are, these are the ways we live as freed people through Christ. These are the ways we live free from the dictating force of fear. Christ's battle and victory with the principalities and powers can be a model for us in our own battles with the principalities and powers of fear. After all, freedom from fear may not mean we experience no fear. It means we have an option of functioning in faith in such a way we are able to act through it. Fear threatens to stop us. And fear threatens to chase us away. The thing is we have the choice. We possess a power that exceeds fear, we just don't realize it. We have the power to allow God's armor to cover us and His truth and wisdom to guide us. Victory can come.

Considering all these things, being a community of believers is no easy task! We are a group of people from all places in society, life, convictions, brokenness, abilities, identities, etc. There is only one thing that can ground us, one thing that can unite us, one thing that allows us to understand the freedom of commitment—our commitment to Christ.

There are two small stories I want to leave you with as we reflect on allowing ourselves to be freed and as we reflect on living out the things we are.

Last weekend I gratefully dwelt in the sanctuary that is St. Meinrad's Abbey. One afternoon I ate lunch with three friendly ladies—Julie, Julia, and Mary. In one part of our conversation Julie shared this story. John Mark, one of the monks of the Abbey, was at a hospital volunteering. He saw a mother looking so carefully after her disabled son. He could tell she had been living life this way for quite some time. As he watched her be with her son, John Mark commented, “This is what holiness is—to give up yourself, be where you are, and be committed.” This is the holy among the human.

I also think of the analogy Mary used to describe the Holy Spirit. She asked me, “You know what hydrogen peroxide is, right? Well, when you pour it onto a cut it bubbles up and cleans it out, ya know? That’s how I envision the Spirit in us—entering our wounded souls and bodies, bubbling up through us and readying us in order to be healed.”

In our 1 Peter passage, Peter praises God for the living hope we have been reborn into by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. This living hope is the freedom that we have opportunity to live into. It is a freedom that gives us a resilience against the threat of identity theft. True freedom for us is found in identifying with Christ, allowing all shackles of fear to drop from our wrists and ankles. In Christ we have that freedom from fear. So let us live in acknowledgement of Christ's sacrifice for the truth we may know today. Let us continue to wrestle as we work out what we believe. And let us face our fears that we may be freed of them. May we dance with abandon as our shackles fall.