

March 31, 2019

TEXT: [Joshua 5:9–12](#)

TITLE: Faith + Free Will

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

I recently stumbled onto a short quote from the Australian writer Clive James, which I like very much. He said this: *Common sense and a sense of humor are the same thing moving at different speeds. A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.* He goes on to insist that anyone lacking a sense of humor should not be trusted with anything. If there is something our world could use right now, it is a sense of humor. Of course, a sense of humor is different from things that are funny. There are lots of comedians in this world. There are more than enough YouTube videos of people doing goofy things that make us laugh. What we need are humorists, people who speak the truth through witticisms or a clever turn of phrase; people like James Thurber, Zora Neale Hurston, Kurt Vonnegut, and the best of them all, Mark Twain.

Mark Twain famously said, “*Man is the animal that blushes. He is the only one that does it, or has occasion to.*” Twain advised us to “*just do what is right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest.*” The high point of his novel Huckleberry Finn comes when Huck tries to be a good boy and do what the world expects of him. He’s been taught it is a sin to tell a lie and that he should turn in Jim as a runaway slave. He even writes a note to alert Miss Watson where Jim is currently hiding. But when he thinks about how much Jim has done for him and what a friend he’s been to him, Huck decides to tear up the note, announcing to the heavens, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell.” The poignant humor is how Huck chose to stay on the path of “wickedness” by doing what he could to get Jim to freedom at last.

*A sense of humor is just common sense, dancing.* Sometimes what needs to be said can be best heard when it is shaped by humor. The king on the throne (or the president in the White House) is too often surrounded by advisors who only tell him what he wants to hear; it is the court jester—the fool—who dares speak words of truth to those in power because he can do so with humor and wit. Shakespeare knew this to be true. Most of his plays contain someone who tells the truth others refuse to say out loud. The most famous is the Fool who is King Lear’s truest advisor, even though his wisdom is wrapped in jokes and sarcasm.

I began this sermon talking about an unusual pairing—common sense and humor. During the season of Lent, I’ve been looking at things that can be paired with faith so that our devotion to God and trust in Christ might become richer and deeper in this season of preparation. In the past weeks we’ve considered Faith + Meditation, and Faith + Justice. Today I want to look at another pairing that, like common sense and humor, may seem like an odd coupling—Faith + Free Will. Faith is the belief there is a God—an all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal Creator of this world and all that is. Free Will is the human capacity to act, to make rational choices and affect change upon this creation. Aren’t these two things at odds with one another?

That's a great question! Theologians through the ages have struggled with the relation between God's power and human freedom. If God is all-powerful, then how can human actions make any difference in this world? If God knows all things, doesn't God already know what we're going to do tomorrow, meaning we are predestined to do those things and therefore don't have true free will at all? In case you didn't know it, these have been major questions for us as Presbyterians. The tension between faith and free will basically comes down to this: God exists and loves you. You exist and love God. Does your love of God—your faith in God—play a role in whether God loves and redeems you? Does our faith play a part in earning, in receiving salvation—or is our faith just a grateful response to the fact that in Christ we are already saved? Presbyterians have long argued that our works don't save us—since even our best works are imperfect. God's grace alone is what saves us. Therefore our faith, our free will, all our daily works are simply how we respond to the good news of God's grace.

This whole topic has literally filled up volumes of theological writing. It involves crazy vocabulary like Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism, philosophy categories like omniscience, omnipotence, and immutability. And it has long divided the Reformed church associated with John Calvin from the Anglican-Methodist church associated with John Wesley. But as we try so hard to speak with precision about these matters, at some point the court jesters and humorists interrupt our theological debates. They call us back to the challenges of life right here and now. People like Huck Finn, who take our religious pamphlets and tear them up, announcing that we don't have time for this now because somewhere there's a runaway slave named Jim who needs to be rescued—and if doing that means this world's church thinks we're going to hell, then so be it. People like Kurt Vonnegut, who saw us filling our shelves with books glorifying war, so he wrote his thin novel Slaughter-house Five about the horrific, senseless bombing of Dresden. And in its opening chapter he said that he told his sons they are not under any circumstance to take part in massacres; and that the news of massacres of enemies is not to fill them with satisfaction or glee. They are not to work for companies which make massacre machinery; but and are to express contempt for people who think we need machinery like that at all.

The humorist shakes us from our empty speculations and calls us to face the challenges of this very day—to live into the tensions and possibilities in the amazing interplay of faith and free will. One powerful example of this pivotal moment involving faith and free will happened long ago, when the ancient Israelites stopped being fed by manna from on high, and suddenly had to survive from the crops and labor of their own hands. (I bet you were wondering if I was ever going to mention our scripture reading for today from Joshua 5.)

For years and years, the Israelites had been wandering in the wilderness. They had left Egypt, a place of slavery, to walk toward a Promised Land—a place where they could worship God and be free at last. During that long journey, they had done what was right and what was wrong. God had given them the Ten Commandments and they'd broken the Ten Commandments. God said "You shall have no other gods before me" and they'd melted down their jewelry to make a golden calf idol. Through it all, God

remained faithful to them, even when they were not faithful to God. Through it all, they'd been fed each day with manna—a heaven-sent food that sustained them for the long wilderness journey. That was their reality until the days of Moses came to an end, and Joshua now led the people to a place called Gilgal in the plains of Jericho.

The Israelites had been long enough in the land of Canaan that they were able to plant crops and harvest grain. Everyone who had lived through the hard times in Egypt by now had died, but the people still celebrated the Passover meal each year so they would never forget how God had rescued them from slavery and given them new life as God's people. But on the day after that particular Passover, the manna stopped. No more heaven-sent food. No more direct provisions from God above. God was still with them. The land God had created would sustain them. But now they'd have to feed themselves. Now the choices they made would shape their lives. Now their faith and their free will would together guide their steps going forward. So how would that work out?

Well, the good news for us—as Presbyterians, Pittsburghers, people of faith in the year of our Lord 2019—is that faith and free will can guide us beautifully. We have faith in the Creator God revealed in Jesus Christ, who came to us and has shown us how to love, to reach out to those on the margins, and trust in a truth that is stronger even than death. And we have been blessed with free will. The days of manna are over. We now plant the crops and harvest the grain. We choose whether to build cathedrals or weapons for massacres. We choose whether to care for children or let border walls and economic injustice destroy the lives of the vulnerable in the land. We choose acts based on the Golden Rule, or acts based on idolizing a golden calf.

The church has not always told this story well. We have made it hard to honor God by overlaying our rigid rules and doctrines upon the simple message of “love the Lord and love your neighbor.” We have divided into denominations and different faith traditions. That's why we need a court jester to speak to us words of truth wrapped in laughter and humor. So remember what I said earlier—how a sense of humor is just common sense dancing. Well maybe faith is just free will dancing. Faith is making choices, now that the manna has stopped—choices made freely as thoughtful people with hearts and brains. Those choices are not to be made in a cold, legalistic way, but in a grateful, loving, energetic way. Faith calls us to dance—to rejoice and give thanks to the Lord in all things. Faith invites us to move through life trusting and acting on our beliefs, guided by the Savior who danced through Galilee and into Jerusalem; and the Holy Spirit who blows us where it will, according to God's perfect grace. *Faith is just free will dancing.* Think about that today and tomorrow. May it send you out into a world without manna but one that is rich in God's love. And may it give you peace and hope in the name of Christ, the Lord of the dance. AMEN.