

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon preached by the Rt. Rev. Shannon Sherwood Johnston
Readings: Isaiah 65:1-9, Psalm 22:18-27, Galatians 3:23-29, Luke 8: 26-39

Do you really think of your life in the Christian faith as having been “set free?” I’m not talking about “free” in some legal, social, or political sense; no, I want us to go deeper than those qualifiers. You know, a lot of people I’ve encountered in my ministry actually think of Christianity as a “religious rulebook”, a kind of code or system of regulations you must live by so as not to be condemned in God’s judgment. That’s not what Christian life is all about at all. The “freedom” that St. Paul’s speaks of in today’s reading from his letter to the Galatians is about having your actual identity, your MOST PERSONAL, MOST REAL identity in being a beloved child of God, baptized into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This is a BIG issue, a big QUESTION for many people, one that stays with us even without our being fully aware of it. In this reading, St. Paul emphatically says that “BEFORE FAITH CAME we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.” He tells us that “law” is a disciplinarian, that is, something that serves the purpose of holding us “in line,” living by the rules. He is even more clear that THIS is **not** faith, saying that—in faith—we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

In short, we ARE **set free** to be children of God, to come to know God through the way God WANTS to become known by us, that is, through a **relationship** that seeks GOD rather than resigning ourselves to a set of rules. The living God is NOT the “super disciplinarian,” the ultimate legal authority (even though so many Christians, often too readily, fall into that kind of thinking. No, a “disciplinarian” PROSCRIBES, INHIBITS behavior, limiting the free will of a person. But as Christians we are not objects of a disciplinarian’s rule but rather are DISCIPLES of a Lord, and there’s a big difference. **Disciples** are free to seek, to grow, to draw ever nearer to the One we follow, Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of Grace, not the custodian of law. Paul is therefore urging us to be loving disciples instead of rule-bound robots.

This begs the question of just what does it look like to be such disciples? What are the marks of a life of true Christian discipleship? How can we be sure that we are actually growing into God’s grace instead of just toeing a line? Here, I want to describe six—“building blocks”—of Christian living by which we can come to know most fully the life of Heaven here and now in this life on earth.

First is our **WORSHIP**. It is in worship that we participate in the two most important realities of being a Christian: Holy Baptism and the Holy Communion. It is also how we engage the sacred Scriptures as people of God. Attendance at worship EVERY SUNDAY is how Christian life begins, grows, and matures. Worship also teaches us that our Christian faith is **not** simply a private or “individual” matter. No, Christianity is inherently a communal faith; it is based on being in a community of fellow Christians. As I have said so often, **CHRISTIANITY MUST ALWAYS BE “PERSONAL,” BUT IT IS NEVER “INDIVIDUAL.”** Worshipping together is our primary means of encountering the risen Lord.

A second “building block” in our discipleship is DAILY PRAYER. The Lord Jesus simply expects that His followers will pray! Is your prayer life truly “alive?” Do you pray . . . each day? As children of God, we were created to pray, because prayer is how we nurture our own personal relationships with

God. And let me tell you something about personal prayer: it should be **90% LISTENING!** I think that when we pray most of us spend too much time telling God what we want God to know or what we want God to do! Listening for what God has for us in our daily prayers creates an “openness,” the kind of environment we need in order for God to **BREAK THROUGH** all of the busyness and clutter of our lives. Your personal prayers each day put you in the best position to receive what God has for you.

I say that our **STEWARDSHIP** comes next. To offer your time, your talents and your money is how you **RESPOND** to the Christian growth you experience in worship and prayer. Remember that Jesus asserted that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” **THAT** truth can make many of us uncomfortable, but I suggest that if we are uncomfortable with this subject it is because we know that we are not giving the time, talent, and money that we **COULD** and **SHOULD** give. The most measurable aspect of personal stewardship is the offering of money to the Church and to charities that help those who are in need. The Scriptural expectation—the Scriptural **WISDOM**—for giving is 10% of your yearly income. But, whatever your level of giving is right now, we must always remember that we give so that **MINISTRY CAN HAPPEN!** Therefore, please understand that your giving is very much a **THEOLOGICAL** matter, that is, it is something that has to do with our **RELATIONSHIPS TO GOD**. Our stewardship is **NOT** simply a way to “take care of expenses” for the church. Jesus Himself spoke and taught about wealth and our giving more than any other single topic because He knew that few realities reveal our **PERSONAL COMMITMENT** to God more than what we do with our money. And the best news is that our stewardship can be one of the very greatest sources of Christian joy and fulfillment. I know this in my own life and I pray it is or will be for you, also.

Another essential part of our discipleship of Jesus is **CHRISTIAN EDUCATION**. This is perhaps the most important measure of how we mature in our life of faith. The use of knowledge and reason is one of the primary ways that the Holy Spirit moves and brings meaning in your Christian life. So, our Christian education is something we seek throughout **ALL** of our lives, not merely children’s Sunday School and youth groups. But this is not about “how much you know” but, rather, it is about nothing less than our spiritual formation and **HOW WE GROW** into the **fullness** of faith. In Christ, through the Holy Spirit, “information” leads to **TRANSFORMATION**.

EVANGELISM . . . is the natural result of that growth, fulfillment, and joy we find in worship, prayer, stewardship and Christian education. In my experience, most Episcopalians are somewhat uncomfortable with evangelism. Perhaps this is because we have seen how it can be misused. Or, possibly we are simply shy about evangelism because we think we don’t know “how to do it.” But the truth is that the best way to be an evangelist is simply to be **yourself**. We are all **UNIQUELY** evangelists! Just share your experiences, your fulfillment, your peace, your hope, your confidence, your joy with others as only **YOU** can share those parts of who you are. Our Lord Jesus has commissioned all of us to be evangelists and the Church is counting on each and every one of us. I can assure you that there is no greater joy, no deeper fulfillment than to bring a person to Jesus Christ and see what happens **THEN!**

Finally, though surely not least, is our **OUTREACH**, our ministries of service to those who are not part of the congregation. I use this as the last of the [six] [five] “building blocks” of our Christian discipleship because outreach is like a “pinnacle” of the life of faith. William Temple, a famous former

Archbishop of Canterbury, once observed that the Church is the ONLY organization that exists for those who are NOT its members. And, quite simply, the best way to imitate Jesus—to be His disciples—is to serve the needs of the world: people who are poor, powerless, lonely, sick, or in despair. When the Church does these things we are truly being the Body of Christ on earth, and come to know what we can know of the Heavenly Kingdom in this world. So, BE DISCIPLES! Through these ways of living and expressing your Christian faith, BE FREE of anything that stands in the way of responding and growing in the grace of Jesus Christ. BE FREE to know that your full identity is realized in God through Jesus Christ. Now live the kind of life in which you may come to know and to love your God.