

## Easter 6 Year A

Some years ago a parishioner came up to me after I had preached a sermon. He was a retired Lutheran pastor, and thus someone who placed considerable value on preaching, so I assumed he was approaching me with some sort of compliment on my sermon.

Instead he asked me: “Kevin, do you know the difference between teaching and proclamation?” “Apparently not” I said, “or else you wouldn’t be asking me the question.”

It is true that my background is in education, so I suppose that I do tend to use the pulpit as a teaching tool, but I remembered that encounter with my Lutheran friend because today’s first lesson from the book of Acts gives us a masterful and rare example of proclamation from one of the first and best: St. Paul.

First, I’m sorry, but the teacher has to come out first. Let me share with you why this was a masterful example of proclamation. Jesus and his first followers were all Jewish. Ancient Jews believed that God was going to send them someone called a Messiah to deliver them. So in their home setting all one had to do was proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah and everybody knew what was being said.

However, when early followers of Jesus went outside Judaism, as St. Paul did in that lesson, they had to deal with the fact that non-Jews didn’t know what a Messiah was and didn’t care. So when St. Paul walked around Athens, the intellectual capital of ancient Greece, he needed to find an angle from which to proclaim Jesus in a way that would make sense to Greeks and draw their interest.

So he walked around and saw the Temple to Zeus, and Jupiter and Poseidon, all of which were idols and false gods to him, until he came across a Temple with the inscription: “To an unknown God,” which gave him what he was looking for.

So he began “what therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.” Masterful. Once he found his path in, he continued to adapt his message for a Greek audience by avoiding any references to Jewish Torah or prophets, all of which would’ve been lost on Greeks, and instead

referred to Greek philosophers and poets in order to proclaim that there is one God who has sent Jesus, whom he has raised from the dead.

I call this masterful proclamation because Paul had to take the core message and translate it into a very different culture. And that, my Lutheran friend would be pleased to hear, is the difference between teaching and proclamation, which distills the core elements of the Christian message, and can apply it with equal force to different people with different assumptions, expectations and cultural values.

So now I would like to conduct with you an exercise in proclamation. First, what would you identify as the core elements of the Christian faith? Paul kept it simple: there is one God who sent his messenger whom God raised from the dead.

I might be inclined to start with the Trinity, but that can be a bit abstract, so I'll take Paul's example and keep it simple. I would say that the core elements are forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus Christ. What would you say?

Second, pretend that you have just arrived in America and you have to translate forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus into terms that Americans understand and take interest in. Paul used the Greeks love of philosophy, but what do Americans value that might be a path to begin a proclamation of forgiveness and eternal life? As I pondered this question it occurred to me that one thing on which American culture has always placed great value is freedom.

So now we have core content and a cultural link, so I'm going to use Paul's technique and try it myself. Ready?

"My sisters and brothers, your ancestors fought long and hard to secure freedom from a foreign monarch, and in establishing this democracy guaranteed the freedom of religion, speech and the press.

Since that time Americans have fought to free those who were once enslaved, Americans have twice fought to overthrow foreign dictators. And even today, when you disagree in matters of policy, it is usually because of competing views of freedom, such as the freedom from government

interference verses the freedom to have health care regardless of one's economic conditions. Your shared value is freedom.

Of all the nations of the world you have distinguished yourself by defending and seeking to understand the meaning of freedom from your foundation to this very day. But there is one freedom about which you may not know, because it is not tied to the rule of law or military might, but the love, grace and mercy of Almighty God.

St. Paul wrote, "For freedom Christ has set us free," because more powerful than the oppression of tyrants is the tyranny of fear which plagues all humans. In the Christian faith we call this "sin," by which we mean anything that erodes our relationship with our creator or with other people.

But the most often repeated commandment found in the Bible is not "do not steal" or "do not commit murder," the most often repeated commandment in the Bible is "be not afraid."

Because from the cross on which he died Jesus looked down to see all those whose fears had delivered him to the cross, and said the most powerful words ever: "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." And this same Jesus, who was killed as a traitor, this Jesus God raised from the dead as a sign and a promise that in God's world life always has the last say.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Free to be forgiven and free to forgive. Freedom from fear and sin and freedom to love and serve. Freedom to live this life in the hope that though this body may expire, we are all going to live forever.

And so, my American friends, on this weekend when we honor those who served this country to preserve the many freedoms we enjoy, let us be equally mindful that true freedom, freedom of the soul, is a gift from God. And let us be mindful of the words of Jesus himself, who said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."

Amen.