

Date Preached	17-Jan-2021	Date Initiated	02-Jan-2021
Where Preached	SAK	Appointed Readings	Epiph 2, Yr B

" [Y]our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you,  
which you have from God, and ... you are not your own. "



If you (or perhaps your children) are of a certain age, the refrain "one of these things is not like the others" may ring familiar to you. At least when I was growing up, this was a frequent segment on *Sesame Street*. On the screen they would show, say, three squares and a circle or three birds and a rhinoceros, while a little jingle played, telling you that one of these things is not like the others and encouraging you to call out the mismatch.

When I began pondering our readings for today, I felt a little like I was back in the land of *Sesame Street*. The story of Samuel in the Old Testament reading and of Nathanael in the Gospel reading are classical call narratives: accounts of how individuals come to discern and then respond to the will of God for their lives, and we find echoes of this in today's psalter, too.

So what, then, are we to make of our *Epistle* reading? It comes out of left field. Saint Paul seems to be mocking his Corinthian correspondents—throwing their own words back at them—and he hastily lurches from proper diet to prostitution to fornication to holiness. Hello!? Did we get the wrong reading? Are we really supposed to talk about sex on a Sunday morning?

When in doubt, however, it's always useful to go back to the collect because it sets the tone and direction for the day's worship. And today, we get a three-pronged prayer: May we be **[i]** illumined by God's Word and Sacraments ... so that we ourselves may **[ii]** radiate Christ's glory ... to the end that He may be **[iii]** known, worshipped and obeyed to the ends of the earth. Just like Samuel, ancient Israel's prophet-in-chief at the zenith of its worldly power, and Nathanael,\* one of the twelve Apostles whom Jesus sent to proclaim the Good News to the world, *we, too*, are called to be filled by God's presence, show forth God's glory and spread the [W]ord of God to all peoples. And for St Paul, holiness—living a life integrity, which flows from its being imbued with the grace of God—is how we do this.

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Paul's message to the members of the church he had founded and nurtured at Corinth is easy-to-summarize, but difficult-to-hear: Your salvation, through Christ, doesn't give you *carte blanche* to live however you please. That, Paul tells them, is a worldly—a non-believer's—way of thinking. Rather, having been united to Christ in His Death and Resurrection, we must make our bodies a temple of the Holy Spirit, Who dwells within us. Thus, Paul's frank message about prostitution and fornication—that is, sex outside marriage. Greco-Roman culture neither criminalized nor discouraged prostitution ... and the prevailing view was that men—and *only* men—could pretty much have whatever way they wanted ... with whomever they wanted ... with

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\* Nathanael is often identified with the Apostle whom Matthew, Mark and Luke refer to as Bartholomew. *LFF (2018)*, s.v. August 24.

impunity. But you Christians in Corinth cannot follow these cultural norms, says Paul: The way of Christ is a less-free ... but ultimately more *liberating* ... lifestyle that embodies and reflects the holiness of the One Who has saved us. And in reflecting Christ's holiness, it draws others into the community of Christ and leads them, also, to His Good News.†

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Paul, in essence, instructs his Corinthian converts to be *in* the prevailing culture—they need not wall themselves off or become hermits in the wilderness—but not *of* it ... because, in the end, their true culture—and *ours*—is Christ Himself. This path cannot have been any easier to hear ... or to follow ... then than it is now. But if our Christian mission, as we pray in today's collect, is to radiate the glory Christ manifests and bring the world to His mercy and grace, what might 'in-but-not-of' look like in the culture that prevails today? Three things come to my mind:

- First, just as Paul emphasizes controlling one's sexual appetites, we might take cognizance of our culture's preoccupation with the gratification of all types of desire. In truth, we've been thoroughly trained to think this way. By *design*, our consumerist economy never ceases tantalizing us with the idea of *more*: newer, better, bigger, shinier, faster, sleeker. If a little is good, then why not maximize? Why settle for enough, if more is on offer? But when we blindly follow this path ... when we don't take a time-out to examine all that we *already* enjoy and the relatively paltry benefit '*more*' will truly bring us ... then we are no longer free. Our stuff comes to control our lives, and our calendars to regulate our time. And as they do, they also crowd out the Christ Who loves us and laments the dominance of our unthinking desires in our lives.
- Second, in today's fraught political landscape, we might look for ways of comity, which Merriam-Webster defines as "mutual consideration between or *as if* between equals."‡ As each side of the political spectrum ratchets up the extremity of its positions, the passion with which it holds them and the scorn it heaps upon any who think otherwise ... perhaps this is a time for us to de-emphasize our civil freedom to believe and say anything we want ... and to do the much harder work of discerning *why* our political adversaries think as they do. When we get past slogans and memes and war-cries ... to root causes and core values ... we may discover far more opportunity for Christ-like "mutual consideration" than the chest-thumpers who monopolize our public discourse want us to realize.
- Finally, if we take seriously our baptismal vows to serve Christ in all persons ... strive for justice and peace ... and respect the God-given dignity of every human being (BCP, 304-05), then we might need to re-think the very nature of freedom itself. Throughout American history, we've championed a freedom whose goal is

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† The entire thrust of chapters 5 and 6 of 1 Corinthians is how to be a good church, an effective community of Christ. Paul takes the Corinthians to task for three types of undesirable behavior (sexual immorality (incest), litigation between believers (*i.e.*, rather than settling disputes within the confines of the church) and fornication (ultimately, being led by one's own libido)); he tells them that these are not compatible with a Christian community's sincere living out of its faith.

‡ Emphasis added.

minimal—if, indeed, *any*—restriction on *my* ability to do exactly as *I* please. But perhaps the freedom of Christ ... perhaps the gift of His *already* having restored to us everything we ever truly need ... is the opportunity for us to do as *God* pleases. Because we have already been given *divine* freedom—forgiveness of sins and eternity of life—maybe the goal of Christian life is *not* the narrow, reflexive maximization of self, but the wider, other-oriented channeling of the freedom-of-God we've received ... to *all* of God's creatures: freedom from want; freedom from fear; freedom from hatred, marginalization and invisibility. In short, every human being's freedom to discern and fully realize God's desires for her or him, without societal stumbling blocks or glass ceilings.

Now, I assure you—and I *beg* you to hear me on this: I am *not* making a partisan point. I am not advocating for any one party's or faction's agenda over another's. In fact, I think the arguments over state-action *versus* private initiative that we've been having in the United States for almost a century now are a divisive distraction. God is agnostic as to political theory and ideology; God's attention is on the *outcomes* we achieve. Whether through HUD or Habitat for Humanity, what God wants is for all people to have livable shelter. Whether through church food pantries or 'food stamps,' God's only care is that all people have enough to eat. *God's* freedom is not about equality—either of opportunity or of distribution—but of *sufficiency*: a sufficiency—an *enough*—that provides human dignity; works God's justice; and secures Christ's peace.

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My goodness, I have traveled far from Paul's diatribe against unholiness. The re-imagination of freedom I have offered may inspire some, and it may strike others as naïve. Perhaps all counter-cultural movements, including the one Jesus founded, require equal parts clear-eyed vision and blind faith, if they are to succeed.

But let me close by turning the question over to you. I invite you to spend fifteen or thirty minutes this week with today's collect. (It's in this week's bulletin and on page 215 of the *Book of Common Prayer*.) Read it; pray it; ponder it; reflect on it. Ask yourself how *you personally* might "shine with the radiance of Christ's glory." How might *you* choose to live so that merely by seeing and knowing you, others would know the Christ Who has saved you? How might *you* serve to bring Christ's freedom—a freedom far surpassing any found in a constitution or a campaign slogan or a protest chant—"to the ends of the earth"? These are, after all, the questions Paul was asking the Corinthians ... and they are still pending.



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