

Year B, February 4, 2018
5 Epiphany
Christ Church, Mexia

"After dinner one Mother's Day a mother was washing the dishes when her teen-age daughter walked into the kitchen. Horrified to see her mother at the sink, she exclaimed, 'Oh, mother, you shouldn't have to do the dishes on Mother's Day.' The mother was touched by this seeming thoughtfulness and was about to take off her apron and give it to her daughter when the daughter added, 'They'll keep until tomorrow.'" (Hodgin, 596)

Is anyone surprised by this story? ... A very different attitude is expressed in the gospel reading this morning. Jesus heals Peter's mother-in-law of a high fever, "and she began to serve them." It was her duty to serve them on the Sabbath, and she did it. She didn't ask her daughter or someone else to do it for her. She didn't say, I'm so weak from the fever, I need to rest – let's get take-out, or whatever the first century equivalent was. ... And dare I say, I believe that she wanted to serve them.

As Ofelia Ortega says: "Service is a key topic in the call and pursuit of Jesus. This woman gets up and turns the Sabbath into a paschal day of service to others. ...her service cannot be understood as a woman's menial work under the domination of lazy males, but as a true messianic ministry... For that reason, this woman is Jesus' first servant and joins him in the radical announcement, in action, of the kingdom of God, ..." She is performing like Jesus, who taught in the synagogue, healed the man of the demon, healed her, and who will go on healing and serving until he ultimately gives his life. Ortega continues, "...deep down (this woman) is already Christian, *diakonisa*, a servant of the church gathered in her son-in-law's house."

Now I have to tell you – duty is my thing! I was born and raised in a Southern Baptist household of the 1940s and 1950s United States. "Duty, Honor, Country" was the motto of my school, my college. Duty was always stressed and internalized as important by me. As an untenured assistant professor in Baltimore, I was asked by the Dean to become the acting chair of my department. I had to be the boss of the very people who would vote on whether or not I was to receive tenure and promotion. And to make matters worse, we were trying to obtain accreditation, which meant that I had to force, for lack of a better word, these people to do things they did not want to do. No one could understand why I would allow myself to be put into this position – but the answer was simple, "No mission too difficult, No sacrifice too great, Duty first!" So, I am biased toward duty, - and the Bible emphasizes duty in many places.

And what is duty? Duty – 1. “That which one is morally or legally bound to do; obligation. 2. The impelling or controlling force of such obligations: Duty calls. 3. Action or conduct required by one’s profession or position. Now, I think that makes duty sound a bit onerous and omits discussing the joy that comes from fulfilling duty. Let me illustrate how duty may work with a story:

“Steve Brown relates the story of a soldier in World War I who was so distraught with the war that he deserted. He tried to find his way to the coast so he could catch a boat and make his way back incognito to his homeland in England. In the darkness of the night he stumbled on a road sign. It was so pitch black and he was so lost. He had no idea where he was or what the sign said. He decided to climb the pole. When he got to the crossbeam, he held on to read the sign. Taking out a match, he lit it, and looked directly (into) the face of Jesus Christ. (You see) he had climbed an outdoor crucifix! Stunned by what he saw, he realized the shame of his life. He was looking into the face of the One who had endured it all and had never turned back. The next morning the soldier was back in the trenches.”

As Christians, we have a duty – to love God, to love each other, and to proclaim what Christ has done for us to the world. All of these compel us to service. And that goes against the current, changed values of our culture – now focused on self and self-fulfillment. Alvin Toffler, the futurist, warned in his *The Third Wave*, which was published in 1980, “We are changing the way ordinary people, in their daily lives, behave. For when we change the deep structure of civilization, we simultaneously rewrite all the codes by which we live.” And two years later, in the *California Management Review*, Ann Howard and James A. Wilson observed: “(Protestantism) once united virtue, salvation, work, and motivation in a productive package, but that package has come undone. Perhaps people now look only to themselves for the motivation that used to be supplied externally and emerge prisoners of their own insularity.”

I am particularly struck by that last part, being prisoners of their isolation or limitedness. I don’t know why people began to leave the church beginning in the 1960s. I suppose there are many reasons. But in doing so we, and especially they, have lost one of the greatest values of the church, community – a place where we can each find comfort and support, while at the same time providing comfort and support to others. For some reason, they, and maybe we to some extent, have lost sight of C. S. Lewis’ concept of duty: “The greatest thing is to be found at one’s post as a child of God, living each day as though it were our last, but planning as though our world might last a hundred years.”

Maybe many people search for freedom by leaving, getting rid of obligations. But, if so, then I think that they don't truly understand freedom. Sir Rabindranath Tagore offers one of the best illustrations of freedom that I know: "I have on my table a violin string (he says). It is free. I twist one end of it and it responds. It is free. But it is not free to do what a violin string is supposed to do – to produce music. So I take it, fix it in my violin, and tighten it until it is taut. Only then is it free to be a violin string."

Freedom is not about NOT having duty or obligation. It is only when we have them and honor them that we are free to be who God created us to be. And it is only when we are being a child of God that we will know true joy.

I know you know these things because I see it all the time, especially last week when the Bishop came to visit. And he saw it too! How blessed I am – we all are – to be part of such a wonderful community – a community that offers us a chance to grow, a community where we can experience love and support, a community that strives to make this world a better place. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word and the Spirit. Amen