

# Sermon Text for April 26, 2020 – Third Sunday of Easter

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

*Psalm 25:4-10, Acts 26:24-29*

*“Free to speak the truth”*

So last week it was really nice to have the break that I had. These last 7 weeks have been a course on adaptability and problem solving and changes in schedules and routines like none of us have ever seen. So it was nice to have a bit of a break and welcome in Michael Wilson to bring us words of hope and truth. But it is also nice to be back and to be able to be together on this Sunday morning without the worry of whether or not the technology is going to work or not. Nice to be back in our now new normal and what has become our status quo.

I have been feeling somewhat convicted to make sure that as we are going through this new normal that I become somewhat self-reflective and ask the question: what are we learning as we go through this together that will make us stronger and more unified once we come out of it? I know that I am enjoying my evening Bible Studies with you all. Again, it is something that you are free to tune into, it isn't zoom, it is like this, youtube, where you can interact or not if you like, and we go over the Scripture from the week before and go into depth with it. I think people are enjoying it, we are getting more and more people joining us at least. So that is good.

So, how are you doing? How has this past week treated you? We find ourselves this week and for the next few weeks until we get ourselves into Pentecost in Easter. Today is Easter, yes it is, it is not a once and done, it is a season in which we find ourselves. Easter provides us with a framework for freedom. The Christian life is really marked by our status as people who have been freed. We were slaves, but the act of Jesus, the sacrifice of our God and our Savior gave us a freedom that you can only have if you have a relationship with Jesus Christ. So Easter provides us with a framework of freedom. We are free from sin. We are free for Christ.

Both of our Scripture for today provide a way in which to interact or approach this freedom which we have. Just because we are free does not mean that we have carte blanche to pursue our own desire and agendas which are separated from the desires and the agendas of the one who made us free. We are free to speak the truth in all that we do, but only if that truth reflects the truth that we have in Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as a disembodied truth. The truth in which we find ourselves has to reflect The Way, the Truth, and the life. The one through whom we find the Father, the eternal God. The only one through whom we can find

God. Let's read about the life that we have to live and the person we have to follow especially in the times in which we are living.

### **READ SCRIPTURE**

John Fea, chair of history at Messiah college and a friend of mine from 35 years ago wrote the following: As the story goes, Rev. James Abercrombie, the assistant rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia, was not happy about the fact that the first president was in the habit of leaving Sunday services before Communion was served. With George Washington present, Abercrombie decided to preach a sermon against those in "elevated stations who uniformly turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord's Supper." Washington apparently acknowledged the rebuke, but never again attended services at Christ Church on Sundays when Communion was served.

The pastor preached the truth and he was free to speak the truth. It had the desired effect, it convicted the wrongdoer of the wrong that he was doing. But it also had the undesired affect of driving a parishioner away from the church on the Sundays that arguably could have been the most meaningful for the parishioner. When I was a young pastor in Florida there was a rash of racially charged events that was taking place in the public schools and the Superintendent put me in charge of heading up a Diversity Council for the school district. At the first meeting the Superintendent laid out what he saw his vision for the council. He said something to the effect: You need to know that I am getting pressured from people on both sides. People who want to wave the confederate flag have the freedom in our first amendment to do that. And then there are those who see that as a threat and are on the side of wanting to have a more diverse society. So I am torn by both sides and we have to keep that in mind.

I was shocked. I never understood our freedom of speech to give us the power, especially as Christians, to say things and to think things and to do things which would put other people in danger or in a position where they were at all considered less than anyone else. Why would anyone, especially someone in a position of power, give equal voice to those who were looking to tear away at the fabric of society or culture. The argument the superintendent gave to put a framework to the committee as a whole was that it was because the first amendment required it.

Our Scripture today takes a very different approach from the one mentioned above. We do not need the first amendment to seek permission to have the freedom to speak the truth. We are given that freedom to speak the truth through our titles as children of the living God. But words and how we understand the world matters. How we discern the truth is going to have an

enormous impact on how we speak the truth. What we say in public and to others is going to be as a result of what we believe and what we understand as our God directing us to say.

So how do we speak the truth if we have the freedom to speak it and what do we say and what should the framework of what we say be especially in the midst of these very confusing times where truth seems to be relative to your political positioning and much less relative to your status as a child of God. This is where Psalm 25 can help us. Turn there with me now will you. Look at the very beginning of the verses that we read, starting in vs. 4. The author is approaching his relationship with God as that of a student. He asks God to teach him his ways and his paths. He doesn't approach God and say I want to fulfill this agenda now help me do it. No, he asks God to teach him what the God's agenda for his life might be. This then leads to a request for God to show him God's truth.

That truth is described especially in vs.9-10 where God nature is revealed as one which is based upon humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness. These three terms are going to be the basis for our understanding of how do we live out our freedom to speak the truth? We do it by seeking humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness. Anything which contributes to that, you speak. Anything which takes away from that, you battle against. As Christians the first amendment does not overstep our obedience to God's command to speak out of humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness.

That brings us to Paul in Acts where we find Paul in a situation where he is addressing the king of the land, as well as his very powerful underlings, and he has that freedom to speak the truth to them in a way that would draw them closer to God. Let's go to Acts and let's set the stage. When we left Paul it was back in Lent. He is still a prisoner of the land. Festus had tried to appease the religious leaders by suggesting that Paul be brought to Jerusalem to trial so that they could have his way with him, but Paul appealed to the emperor and as a result was able to steer clear of Jerusalem and eventually be taken to Rome.

But in the meantime, Agrippa, who was the ruler of that local land, called a King even though he was not the emperor, wanted to see Paul. Paul witnesses to Agrippa about Jesus, speaks to the truth to him in a way that reflects the humility, the steadfast love, and faithfulness of God. So Paul is in prison for his faith. He did not have the physical freedom that he may have wanted, but he still felt the need to speak, as we read in vs.25, the sober truth as it referred to Jesus. Paul always looked for the opportunity to speak the truth of Jesus as we read in I Peter 3:15 – Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet do it with gentleness and reverence.

Paul's freedom to speak the truth was meant to bring others to salvation in Jesus Christ. For Paul, most of the traffic on the bridge between us and God is moving toward us. Paul was not focused on his own desires or his own needs. His goal was to proclaim the power of Jesus Christ. His proclamation that we find in the previous verses all reflect a sense of humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness.

Our freedom to speak does not come from anything the government provides or doesn't provide. It comes from Psalm 25 which gives us a roadmap, or a blueprint to seeking after the will of God. It comes from Paul in Acts whose primary goal was to bring others to Christ. Notice the accusation of Festus in vs.24 where he accuses Paul of putting science ahead of common sense and the needs of the people. He is told that too much learning is driving you insane. But his science, his words were for the sake of saving people and giving them a new life in Christ. His witness was driven by his own personal experience with Jesus Christ as well as his knowledge of the prophets who foretold the coming of Christ.

The freedom to speak the truth that we have probably has very little resonance with where you are today. Some of you this week have come very close to the breaking point. Families are exhausted with kids zoomed out. How does humility, steadfast love and faithfulness play into your interactions at home? You are frustrated by the shutdown and you want to just get a haircut or hang out at Fireside. How does humility, steadfast love and faithfulness play into that?

You are leading a state, a company, a church, a nation and trying to bring people to a better place emotionally and physically, how does what you are doing and saying reflect humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness? We are free to speak the truth. The Christian Church has always been on the side of Psalm 25. As Christians the truth has to reflect Jesus in humility, steadfast love, and faithfulness. If not, then you are not speaking truth, you are speaking and acting and thinking merely to achieve your own personal goals. Paul was willing to be in chains for the truth. We ought to be willing to discern between the freedom to say what we want to say, and the freedom to speak the truth in Jesus Christ.