

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner

Sept 13, 2009 – Rally Day

Off Lectionary : Jeremiah 31:31-34

Ephesians 2:11-22

*This testimony is very tied in with the anthem that will follow – “Freedom Come”*

### Inside These Walls

I am doing something that I rarely do. I have skipped the lectionary text for this morning and chosen the Scriptures myself. I know—I am going wild in my last couple of weeks with you. And I also have decided to do something else that is different with you. This morning, I want to offer less of a sermon and more of a testimony. I want to tell you why it is important to me to come to church and to worship. And I don't mean why I, the Rev. Shannon Kershner, come to worship; that is, because it is my job. I mean why I, Shannon, come to worship.

I read recently that around 25% of American adults attend a weekly worship service. My hunch is that at least 70% of other American adults get up and leisurely go to eat brunch or run to get a cup of coffee instead. And while I certainly think I could enjoy that kind of slower Sunday morning pace for a while (I did through most of my college years), I know that now, my soul would start to ache if I too often missed being inside these walls, participating in the act of worshipping God. But why?

As I preached a couple of weeks ago, I do not believe it is just by chance that we come to worship each week. I do believe that when we come for worship, we are responding to a summons from God. I believe we were created to worship. That theme runs all throughout Scripture, especially the Psalms. Psalm 139 claims that we were created by God, for God. And in Romans, Paul affirms that God's Spirit groans in prayer on our behalf from deep within our souls. But, as we all know, we can be awfully good at drowning out the noise of the Spirit's groans and blowing off the summons to gather on an early Sunday morning. So again, why am I here, why are you here, inside these walls, to worship God?

First and foremost, I come to worship because I can think of no better way and no better place to praise the One who has given me breath. While I can center myself in God on a morning walk, or while I can sing to God as I drive home, or while I can pray alongside my children at their bedsides, no other time than this set-apart time of worship offers me this kind of focus on God and God's Living Word. And so I must come and let my voice join with the chorus of other voices in heaven and on earth singing Alleluia and Glory. I feel compelled to do so.

But I also come to worship because when church is at its best, inside these walls, I find the freedom of grace and I remember the responsibility to live it out. Inside these walls, I find a community of faith who is trying its best to live out the reality we find written in Paul's letter to the Ephesians—the promise that in Christ we have all been brought near, made into one new humanity, and built together into a dwelling place for God.

Inside these walls, these Woodhaven walls, I find men and women, girls and boys, with more diversity than you might first think, trying its best to remember that Christ has already broken down **every** dividing wall of hostility that the world tries to build between us. No matter how much money we make; the level of education we have attained; what language we speak; whom we love; inside these walls, we do our best to live with Christ as our peace. We do our best, knowing that we always have a way to go, living out the affirmation that we have been made together into a dwelling place for God, with no one left on the outside looking in. For inside these walls, as we gather to worship, we see people with whom we have been made family in Christ—even those whose faces we do not yet recognize and whose names we do not yet know.

And it is because of Christ actively forming us together, making us no longer strangers, that I find such freedom in church. Since we are no longer strangers, I know I have the freedom to come into worship on some Sunday mornings feeling joyful and lively, full of the Spirit and strong in faith. And because of the way Christ is actively forming us together, making us no longer strangers, I also find freedom to come into worship on some Sunday mornings, kind of limping along, wrestling with the burdens of grief or anger, praying the prayer of the Jewish father, “Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief.”

Because in these walls, in this act of worship, we proclaim and trust that God has given us the freedom to be **fully** ourselves—in all our strength and in all our weakness. How? As it says earlier in Ephesians, God has **already** saved us, set us back into right relationship with God, not by **our** faith, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, as a gift from God. We have been made whole not because of **our** works, not even our own work of believing, but because of what **God** has done in Jesus and continues to do in us through the Spirit. This is what we know.

And so with that assurance we can walk inside these walls, gather in the act of worship, and be our fully messy human selves in the presence of God and in the presence of the gathered congregation. Because of the freedom that comes with knowing that we are in Christ, we do not have to put on our “good church faces” when we come into worship. We do not have to pretend to have it all together, to pretend to have it all figured out, or to pretend that we never wrestle with doubt or with fear.

For, as we say in the call to confession, the truth is that when we do those things, when we come inside these walls and pretend to be our perfect self, the only ones we are deceiving are ourselves. God knows who we are. And yet God decided from before the foundation of the world to embrace **all** of who we are through God’s Love Made Flesh, Jesus. And God has given us the gift of worship in which we can be who we are—no more and no less.

And that is the freedom of grace, sisters and brothers. Because where else in our world can we go and be received as important simply because we are a child of God? Certainly not in school; usually not at work; sometimes not even in your family. But when church is at its best, living into its call to be a dwelling place for God, we have that freedom to be fully who God had created us to be. And we also have the freedom to explore more deeply our identities as children of God and how that impacts all that we say and all that we do. For as I have preached in the past, while God does not ask us if we have arrived, God does ask us to keep moving in the right direction.

So we walk inside these walls and come to worship, finding the complete freedom to be our fallible, human selves, a freedom that can only be described as a gift of God’s grace. And as we always tell our new members, we are invited to inhale that freedom of grace as deeply as we can, in the hope that over time, that grace will begin to shape not only the way we see ourselves, but also the way we see one another and our place in the world. For what goes hand in hand with the freedom of grace is the responsibility to live it out.

Through God’s grace, we have been made citizens with the saints and members of the household of God not simply for our sake, not simply for the sake of the church, but for the sake of the world. This is the other reason why I come to worship on a Sunday morning, and perhaps why you do too. I come to worship inside these walls with you so I might get ready to move outside these walls with you in order to exhale that grace and freedom of new life for others.

I will never forget a story my father once told me about an experience he had in the Waco WalMart. Now, my father does not like going to places like WalMart. It is nothing against the store, he just does not like shopping or being in such a mass of humanity. So my father was already in a bit of a mood

when he walked in. After going through the doors, he quickly saw a man who was clearly living with mental illness. The man was angry, talking loudly to himself, acting in ways that made others nervous. Dad wanted to just slip by him to get what he needed so he might leave. But as soon as that man saw my father, he started walking right towards him, angry and agitated.

And in a moment of what my father can only describe as pure grace, honed by years of weekly practice in worship, my father caught a glimpse of this man through the eyes of God. And because of that vision, Dad found himself asking, "How are you?" And those simple words, that very small act of genuine concern, transformed that man's demeanor. Dad said it was an epiphany moment for him. He believes that for that brief time, he was given a glimpse of that man as a brother in Christ. And when he treated him as such, the man responded as a brother in Christ. Dad said it was like the man lit up from the inside out, grinning as widely as he could, offering my father his Dr. Pepper.

It is a small moment, a seemingly insignificant moment, but it is a moment in a Waco WalMart that illustrates what exhaling the freedom of grace looks like in action. Exhaling the freedom of grace you receive in worship looks like bagging up food in a food pantry; working with Habitat for Humanity on the National Day of Service; volunteering to read to children at a school; calling a friend who is sick; or choosing to treat your family with kindness instead of dumping on them the baggage of the day.

And exhaling the freedom of grace you receive in worship also looks like getting involved in politics to be a voice for justice or mercy; taking a public stand for something you believe is right; actively disputing stereotypes that get tossed out in conversation. I am sure you could think of other examples and I hope you will. You will hear some others in a little bit when we get a wrap-up of Mission and More.

But I believe that coming inside these walls for worship is important so that we might be prepared by God's Spirit to move outside these walls in service. So that we might be prepared by God's Spirit to exhale God's freedom of grace for others. Because with the gift of grace comes the responsibility to live it out for the sake of the world until the day comes when all people join their voices singing Alleluia and Glory. Until the day comes when worship is continuous and everyone has a seat at the table and all tears are but a distant memory and all pain has past. And you all know that day is coming. For we catch glimpses of it all the time inside these walls and outside of them, as well.

I appreciate you letting me take this sermon space this morning to offer you my testimony as to why I, Shannon, find it life-giving to be in worship on Sunday mornings. I invite you to consider your own testimony as you reflect on why you have come here, on this rainy Sunday morning, to gather for worship inside these walls. What do you hope might happen?