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## *Free At Last!*

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**A sermon by The Rev. George M. Maxwell, Jr.  
The Seventh Sunday After Easter - Year C**

Our youngest child graduated from college last week!

We are feeling a new sense of freedom, and so is he.

Peter is a photographer. Part of his graduation was his exit show. He exhibited a collection of his work at the Lamar Dodd School of Art, together with other students in photography and sculpture.

This reviewer found his work to be smart, savvy, and sophisticated.

But, we also had a memorable family moment at dinner before the opening night of the show.

I should have anticipated what was going to happen by the way the planning for the event unfolded. Slowly, over the course of several weeks, the intimate dinner we had envisioned expanded to include twenty-five people.

At one point, my wife, Sally, exclaimed, "I know I'm dealing with our family when the crisis of the day is that your son wants to invite your ex-wife's brother's ex-wife!"

In our family, we really don't talk about the family tree as much as we do the family orchard.

When we finally got to the table, though, I felt blessed to live in this orchard.

I could see and feel how deeply all of these people cared for Peter.

I could remember how each of them brought him to life by believing in him, by being present to him, and by sacrificing for him.

I could see how much of his identity was shaped by them.

All of them-his mother, his step-mother, his grandmothers, his God-parents, the parents of his friend who essentially adopted him in high school, his older sisters, his friends, his cousin, one of my friends who always seemed to have something for him to do just when he needed money, , and, yes, my ex-wife's brother's ex-wife.

They were all there, and it felt like Peter was free to be with them in a new way.

It's interesting how different this sense of freedom felt from the freedom that so often gets talked about in commencement speeches.

To be clear, I'm thinking of a hypothetical commencement speaker, a composite of various commencement speakers that I have heard over the years.

I am not referring to anything that U. S. Senator Saxby Chambliss had to say in Athens on Friday night.

Really, though, there must be a commencement speech protocol somewhere that says, "no matter what else you say, you must do these three things: first, congratulate the students on their achievement; second, encourage them to go out into the world and make it a better place somehow; and third, remind them that they are free to be whoever they want to be."

Sometimes it's a call "to find your own voice," or "to be your own person," or "to avoid doing what everybody else is doing just because they are doing it."

However it's phrased, the message is the same. You are in charge of your life. Make your own choices. All things are possible for you. There is nothing that you cannot accomplish.

This is good advice, as far as it goes. It's hopeful. It's inspirational. And, it avoids offending anyone.

But, it seems to me that this sense of freedom carries the wrong preposition.

It speaks of a freedom "from" lots of things, but not a freedom "for" anything.

It protests against any restrictions, but it doesn't have a good sense of where it might be going.

It gives you choices, but it doesn't really help you very much when you are trying to make them.

It looks to the future, but it doesn't know what to make of the past.

In the reading from John's Gospel that is appointed for today, Jesus has what amounts to a commencement comment of his own.

And, he does something that helps us make sense of what it might mean to gain a freedom "for" something.

We have gone back in time to Maundy Thursday.

Jesus gathers his disciples around him for a final meal. He tries to show them things that will help them make sense out of the next stage of their lives. He washes their feet. He breaks bread with them. He drinks wine with them.

He tries to tell them things that he wants them to remember. He commands them to love each other as he has loved them. He tells them that the Holy Spirit will come to guide them.

And, then he does one more thing. He prays for them.

He knows that they don't fully understand what he has shown them, so he prays for them.

He knows that they won't remember all of what he has told them, so he prays for them.

"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one." (Jn. 17: 20)

The poet Maya Angelou once said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

Jesus made the disciples feel that they were loved, that somehow he would always be with them, and that they would never

be alone.

He made them feel a freedom "for" relationship, both with the triune God and with each other.

He made them feel that they belonged together as one.

It seems to me that gaining our freedom is really a process that, at any one moment, looks a lot like the Michelangelo sculpture of the figures emerging from blocks of marble.

Michelangelo said that he didn't create figures as much as liberate them. He could see the figures in the block of marble, already shaped in perfect form. He simply cut away all of the rock that didn't belong so that other people could see them too.

Gaining our freedom, then, is not about being anybody we want to be. It is about becoming who we are meant to be.

It's not about having unlimited choices. It's about making the right choices.

It's not about being free of our past. It's about making sense out of our past.

Just as Michelangelo's figures seem to be emerging into the room and toward each other, we are meant to be free "for" relationship, both with the triune God and with each other.

The choices that we make are like the rock that is chipped away to liberate the marble figures. It's the stuff that holds us back, gets in the way, and keeps us from engaging each other.

That's why, I think, the farther that we emerge from the marble, the more freedom "for" that we gain, the fewer choices we actually have to make.

It is as if we come to take for granted more and more of the moral decisions we would otherwise have had to struggle to make.

As Augustine put it, the highest state of human freedom is not "being able not to sin," it is "being unable to sin."

This is the kind of freedom that I felt at Peter's exit show dinner, a freedom "for" that finds its shape and form in relationship.

The truth is that Peter does not face limitless possibilities.

Peter was planted in a particular orchard.

He is, as we say in the South, a product of where he comes from and who his people are.

These things set the context for the story in which he will live. He has a past and he can't just cut himself off from it and still be him.

But, he also has a future that has not yet been determined entirely.

He does have choices to make, interpretative decisions that will give the story of his life a certain unity or coherence, decisions that will help him make sense out of his life as a whole and the things that he cares about.

I know now that he will not have to make these decisions alone.

I know now that he will be surrounded by people who care for him and, in some cases, know him even better than he knows himself.

I know now that he will have people praying for him.

And, I know now that he knows this too!

Amen.

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