

Freedom to be new creatures

Last week Josh invited us to put our ears to the earth, to listen to what the animals might teach us about living well as creatures. They invite us to consider our sense of relatedness, or lack thereof. As I spend time in creation, I wonder, why we stand aloof from the rest of creation, treating it as resource to be exploited? Why do we seem bent on rejecting any limitations of our relatedness? This morning, I want to explore what drives us to reject the sense of relatedness we see so clearly in animals, because it is modern culture's rejection of any sense of being "bound" which is creating our ecological crises.

When we consider the "groaning of creation," we realise that what we're doing to our home is an amplification of the drama that plays out within all of us. The wrestle between our basest desires and "the better angels of our nature." Which means the ultimate solution to our ecological problems is a re-orientation of our sense of relatedness as humans. This is a key lesson that animals teach us. Relatedness to one another, to our non-human siblings, relatedness to our home, our *oikos*. Creation is groaning, much of it the consequences of what we have done and continue to do with our freedom as humans. A freedom we have used to reject limitations.

In our epistle reading, Paul speaks of living by a rule of new creation. To give a bit of context to this, a key theme of Galatians is our freedom in Christ, and what we do with it. Galatians 5:1 says: "For **freedom** Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a **yoke** of slavery." In the face of those requiring believers to adhere to the Old Testament laws, Paul insisted: No! freedom in Christ was absolute. However, true Christian freedom is put to the service of the other. Gal 5:13: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Paul's good news wasn't simply freedom *from* the law, it is freedom *to* walk through life in a way of relatedness. Paul's understanding of this relatedness is walking *with* the Spirit. By which we are becoming a new creation. The more we walk with the Spirit; the more the way of 'the world', which traffics in our basest desires, becomes dead to us. This is the **rule** Paul urges us to live by: to walk by the Spirit in the way of Christ, by which "the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

In our Gospel reading, Jesus expresses this way of life with the metaphor of being yoked to him. A metaphor of two oxen yoked together, the more experienced leading, bearing most of the load. The younger following the lead, for whom the yoke is light, and the burden kind. Sharing the yoke with Jesus brings rest for the soul. True rest, peace, and liberation come from being yoked, from voluntarily placing limits on our freedoms. Isn't this what our weary world so desperately needs? A world of contented people, at peace with themselves?

Eugene Peterson's popular translation of this passage reads:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

It's beautiful. However, it's worth noting that it was written for another time and place – one much more religious than ours. And our most recent census shows that NZ is more irreligious than ever. I wonder if this passage would speak more strongly to us today if we change one word: "Burned out on *irreligion*."

How do I mean? Well, what is religion? *Re-ligio* means to be bonded or related, again. Think ligaments. Religion is the art of relatedness: with God, creation and one another. It is what holds us together. What yokes us, grounds us, tethers us. The reality is, we are made for relatedness. One way or another, we will end up yoked to something. We can either live by this rule that Paul speaks of, be yoked to Jesus, or be ruled by a culture that is forming, or deforming us. In *Practicing the Way*, John Mark Comer writes: "Choose your constraints, or they will be chosen for you, not by the Spirit of God stirring our heart toward love, but by a programmer in Silicon Valley working to steal your time and shape your behaviour. The choice is yours: Rule or be ruled." He's referring to having a rule of life that places limitations on our use of technology *in order to* put our lives back under the control of our deepest desires and most noble aspirations. To live a free life that is fully human, fully alive. In step with the Spirit. Freedom is found in limitation. This is the paradox of freedom. True freedom, and also the solution to our ecological woes, is found in relatedness. Choosing to be yoked to the simple way of Jesus. Living freely and lightly.

This paradox was driven home to me recently in North Carolina. One of the starkest things for me from my time in Statesville was the inability to walk anywhere. They would assert their freedom proudly. Yet I wondered, how free are you really if you must get into a car to get anywhere. You cannot simply walk out your front door and find yourself on an adventure. It truly is dangerous business walking out your front door there, not in a Tolkienian sense, but because city planners have designed a non-human system which curbs human movement to improve traffic flow. Our culture is one of rejecting any limits to our freedoms. Of being bound. Yoked. But in the process, we become more enslaved. Modern economies thrive on the rejection of ecological and economic limits, pursuing growth at all costs converting our home, the gift of God's creation into resource, and consumer culture encourages us to satiate any and all of our appetites in our pursuit of happiness.

This week, our family went to see the movie *The Wild Robot*, about a robot, Roz, who washes up on a remote island and sets about looking for a task to complete, which she finds in mothering a runt

gosling. Towards the end of the film, Roz utters a key line that struck me as I was reflecting on this sermon. She says to a group of animals, predator and prey, who are all fighting amongst themselves while sheltering together during a snowstorm: "In order to survive, we must become more than we are programmed to be." Make no mistake, we are being programmed. By wealthy corporations with vested interests in our *de-formation*. We are being programmed according to our most base desires and impulses. Formed into consumers rather than creatures living in relationships.

With the result that we are sleepwalking into ecological disaster. "How do we wake up?" asks mythologist Martin Shaw, "I'll give you a little plot spoiler right here, it sounds so deceptively simple. The secret is relatedness. Relatedness. Relatedness breeds love, and love can excavate conscience. Conscience changes the way we behave. Relatedness is the way that we wake up." He calls this "our labour of becoming human."

As modern civilisation continues to pursue a technological future free of constraints and limitations, a healthy Christianity in this context will be an outlaw Christianity. A wild Christianity, a prickly burr of a thing, that rejects the conformity of our society – by embracing our limitations: insisting on our materiality, our creatureliness, celebrating and seeking out our bondedness to place, to community, to whenua and moana, to simple pleasures. Being tethered to Christ will make us untethered to the way of the world. A strange people who are bound, tethered, yoked. In relationship. With their God, with each other and with the rest of God's creation. A people concerned with the real happening "right here", in and around our bodies. A people bound to our local communities. Seeking five miles, rather than five minutes, of fame. Bound. Tethered. Yoked. Known. Re-ligio. Walking with the Spirit, free to choose our own constraints, thank you very much.

Freya India, a Gen Z cultural commentator in a recent interview on what is needed to address the mental health crisis of her generation summarised:

"We are looking for something we can place our feet on that won't fall away. We are looking for something more than this life where people have so few loyalties to each other, where everything is subject to constant change, where we can't even feel rooted in our culture... I want to be bound more! Bound to people; bound to places; bound to right and wrong!"

If the Church is to survive, if humanity is to survive, for our home (as we know it) to survive, we must become more than we are programmed to be. Thanks be to Christ, who through his death and resurrection has given us his Spirit, that we might live by this rule: that the world is crucified to me and I to the world. A new creation. That is, we are becoming something more free - free to love and live yoked to Jesus. New creatures, free to walk in sync with the Wild Christ. Each day we are given the choice, will we walk with him, and talk with him, and learn the unforced rhythms of grace? Let us consider how the problems writ large in our world echo the drama, the conflicts within us, between

our desire to be yoked either to Christ, which is true freedom, or the yoke of slavery which masquerades as freedom.

I am burned out on irreligion. Burned out of secular systems that shape us in inhuman ways. In this city and nation. In our world. In my own life. How about you?

Reflection: I wonder what small action you can do today, this week, to reassert your relatedness, your yoked-ness, to God, to others, to creation, to place? Perhaps walk about your neighbourhood. Leaving the phone behind and noticing. Loiter with intent in a place. Strike up a conversation with your barista. Avoid the self-checkout and talk to the cashier by name. Ask yourself whether that shiny new thing is what your soul needs. Ask the Holy Spirit the same question. Pray to the Wild Christ to be open to interruptions. Practice disruptive spiritual practices that create friction in our contactless world.

Let us pray (some of my favourite prayers from the ANZPB):

Let us be at peace within ourselves.

Let us accept that we are profoundly loved
and need never be afraid.

Let us be aware of the source of being that is
common to us all and to all living creatures.

Let us be filled with the presence of the great
compassion towards ourselves and towards all
living beings.

Realising that we are all nourished from the
same source of life, may we so live that others
be not deprived of air, food, water, shelter, or
the chance to live.

Let us pray that we ourselves cease to be a
cause of suffering to one another.

With humility let us pray for the establishment
of peace in our hearts and on earth.