

“Being Set Free from All That Binds Us”

John 11:32–44

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As many of you know, Dana and I have just returned from a week of vacation at Kiawah Island. We had a wonderful time with Dana’s father, Ian and Brittany, Ali, our two German Shepherds and Ian and Brittany’s six-month-old Whippet Arthur. The dogs all got along well – as did the people — and they all enjoyed an hour-long walk on the beach in cool weather every morning, but Arthur especially enjoyed himself and even put on a show.

The last full day we were there, November 1, is the first day of the fall/winter season Kiawah allows dogs to be off leash on the beach. Rika enjoyed this but never strayed far, Tusker would not have moved away from us at all if we had let him off leash, but Arthur went wild and showed us what a Whippet can do, including run up to thirty-five miles per hour. He went flying back and forth, jumping over the German Shepherds, roaring around in circles.

He responded to Ian’s voice commands until he got a little too far ahead of us and saw a group of birds on the beach ahead, and then he changed into another gear and nearly caught one. Had the beach patrol witnessed this, Arthur would have earned a \$250 fine for harassing the wildlife. But they didn’t, and then, he saw a young man coming the other way on a bicycle. So, he started chasing him for a while, taunting him within the illusion that he could win the race, then roaring ahead. To our relief, the young man thought this was great fun.

But all in all, Arthur did well, he is very young, and the off-leash rule enabled him to be himself. It also allowed us to see what he could do, what a Whippet really is. On leash, they are friendly enough, but set free, they are a work of joy. They still have boundaries with consequences, but unleashed, their true nature is revealed.

Such is the case with human beings. Unbound, our true nature comes out, we approach our potential, but there are so many things that bind us. It begins with our personal histories, the names we have been called, the limits

others have given us, the expectations we internalize — sometimes lofty, other times minimal, but always binding. There are cultural frameworks that limit us too, biases about what women or men can do, ceilings placed upon people with certain educational or socioeconomic backgrounds. And there are outright injustices, prejudices about ethnicity, religious ideation, and personal identity.

I think of a housing project in Richmond, Virginia, where the church I served there did a good bit of ministry. We had good experiences — at least on the surface — with Bible studies, service projects, a tutoring endeavor, and inviting the young people to join us when we picked out pumpkins at a pumpkin patch. But we always faced a wall when we tried to go deeper. It was more than our racial and economic differences. It was the absence of hope these young people had.

As one person with history in the community explained, none of these young people expected to live past thirty. In one week we worked there, one parent was shot and killed, another parent was stabbed with a knife, the young people witnessed drug purchases daily, and I broke up a fight between four teenagers. Why would they think about long-term goals like education? Why wouldn't they do wild and reckless things? How could they expect to live very long? Why would they live with hope? They were beloved children of God, but every one of them was bound by the expectations they internalized for good reason.

We may never fully understand this kind of limitation of human potential, but there are limitations we all face, like the protocols of a pandemic, and there is one thing that binds all of us most tightly — the all-consuming fear of our one common reality: the fact that every living creature, including every human being, dies. Morality, finitude, death — it is one troubling reality none of us can avoid, and our awareness of it can be more than binding. It can be crippling. A great existentialist said that while he did not believe in God or the possibility of an afterlife, this reality was so utterly depressing that it was like staring into a bottomless pit. So, he chose to live as if there was a God and an afterlife.

I'm not sure how anyone, especially a highly intelligent person, pulls this off. It takes an incredible gift for compartmentalization. But I understand

the motivation. An awareness of finitude can quench the joy of life. It can bind us more tightly than any leash on a fast dog.

But the good news is Jesus comes to set us free from all that binds us. In his experience of calling, recorded in Luke 4, Jesus is not only tasked with bringing good news and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor; he is commissioned to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. This covers every kind of binding we have named and more, anything and everything that oppresses people physically, emotionally, or spiritually. No matter how we are bound, Jesus sets us free so that we can approach our true potential and thus know the joy our Creator intends.

In today's reading from John 11, Jesus addresses the one central form of oppression that binds us most. He encounters people in grief and grieves with them. Death is real, it separates us from those we love. Lazarus has died and the people who loved him are in pain. But, as we know, this is not the end of the story. Jesus calls for Lazarus to come out of the tomb and amazingly, he does. It is not a resurrection. It is a resuscitation. Lazarus will eventually die. But this miracle of all miracles foreshadows Jesus' resurrection which ultimately delivers us from the oppressive force of death. It lets us know that death does not have the final word, and thus, while we grieve the absence of loved ones, we do not grieve as those without hope, nor do we question the meaning of life. In the light of resurrection, life has enduring value.

Yet, at the end of the story, it becomes apparent that Jesus' raising of Lazarus is not quite enough. There is one more act of liberation he must perform. Lazarus is still wrapped up in burial cloths. He is bound not just by the realities of sickness and death but by all the trappings and cultural frameworks that accompany death — including the tight cloth that holds his body. So, Jesus says, "Unbind him, and let him go." Unbind him... from all that restricts his full humanity... and let him go... like a Whippet on a beach.

It is a message we need to hear. Many times, our liberation has been accomplished. In the reading from Revelation, when God talks about doing a new thing, doing away with death and wiping away all tears, God adds this final word. "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end." It is done, it is accomplished. But we have to embrace it because we

are bound by the trappings of oppression — limiting expectations, guilt and shame, the fear of death — even though we have the promise of eternal life. Until we are set free from these bonds, we will not be our true selves.

So, how do we do this? How we embrace our gift of freedom? Not alone — we need God’s help and the help of others, but our effort is required, our intentionality, our willingness to be honest about where we struggle and our genuine desire to be set free from whatever binds us.

There is a scene in the film “Brother Sun, Sister Moon” wherein a follower of Francis of Assisi is on his knees weeping, praying over and over again the same phrase. He has lusted after a woman and thus prays, “Father forgive me! Father, forgive me! Father forgive me!” Francis observes this, walks up to him and putting a hand on his shoulder, says almost dismissively, “I think he heard you the first time.” He then goes on to say that not all are meant for a celibate life. It’s okay if this man chooses another path.

It is an enlightening scene. How many times do we struggle not because life or God or someone else has bound us, but because we are still bound by our own fears, anger, guilt, shame or unwillingness to receive the hope God offers? To be clear, some oppression is external. And some fears, like the fear of death, can only be addressed personally. There is no shame in fear. But God in Christ offers us deliverance from all that oppresses us. Sometimes we have to name our struggle to get through it, but God helps us do that too.

What might life look like if we were set free from all that binds us? What might be possible if we were to experience life like a Whippet running free on a beach? We would still have boundaries. We shouldn’t harass the wildlife. But what joy might we know and share if we were to accept God’s gift of forgiveness, if we were to embrace God’s offer of eternal life, if we were to believe that who we are is enough because God loves us as we are? Life without fear, guilt, shame, worry... life filled with joy, hope, love, peace... life set free for service, compassion, kindness, and the pursuit of justice... That sounds pretty good to me.