

## What Good Comes through Self-Determination?

People of God – people sourced by that immeasurable Love, we are together via livestream and here with this land which has been in relationship with people for millennia before us and will be in relationship with a learning community for years to come. I invite us to wonder together this morning: **What good comes through self-determination?** That is, what good comes through freely choosing our own course of action or way of life?

As we move into this time of wondering, let's first pause to pray. Holy Spirit, we invite your challenging, affirming, loving energy to open us up and help us grow. Guide the meditations of our hearts and minds. Amen.

Friends in faith, in last week's epistle reading, the author of James asserted that faith without action is dead. We explored the question of how we can practice mutuality – faith alive through respectfully sharing our experiences. And last week's gospel lesson provided material for wondering about the ways Jesus and his contemporaries interacted with one another.

In contrast, this week's scripture readings invite us to look inward to develop deeper understanding of our own experiences with self-determination. I find it serendipitous that the presidential debate occurred between our question of how to practice mutuality and our question of what good can come through self-determination. If mutuality sits at one end of a spectrum and disdain at the other end, many wanted to see where each candidate would land along that behavioral spectrum (from mutuality to disdain). And we witnessed how often each candidate practiced mutuality and how often they strayed from it.

This week's readings have brought to mind for me these famous words from our Declaration of Independence: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men [forehead slap] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men [forehead slap], deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...*" In other words, several with power in our society in 1776 (often referred to as our founders) shared a conviction that securing self-determination (that is, "*life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*") was their clear purpose in instituting a democratic government. During the presidential debate, each candidate conveyed something of how they would approach leading our democratic government – that is, our collective approach to upholding self-determination. I appreciated this opportunity our sacred texts have given us to reflect on mutuality and self-determination on either side of the momentous presidential debate. And I am no civics teacher, so we will do well to shift gears.

Each of our readings for today speaks to our concept and experiences of self-determination. I find in each an illustration that answers this question: **what does self-determination look like?** I sense that the three writers share in common a desire to convey that faith supports courage of one's convictions – the courage to do what one believes is right. I hope the Holy Spirit will work through the readings to help us see what self-determination looks like in our own lives. We might find that we carry forward the question of what good comes through self-determination.

Let's begin with the reading from Isaiah. Before hearing again an excerpt, I invite us to wonder with Isaiah: **What is your superpower?**

**What is one attribute that people regularly affirm in you – a skill, attitude or energy through which you have positive impact?** Hold that in mind as we hear again from Isaiah: *“Exalted God has given me a skilled and well-trained tongue, so that I can sustain the weary with a timely word.”* Let’s know our strengths – our superpowers. Isaiah knew theirs.

Isaiah continues: *“God awakens me morning after morning – wakens my ear, to listen like a student...”* Let’s seek out time and space in which we can attune to God’s Holy Loving Spirit’s power to inspire us.

Isaiah continues: *“Exalted God opened my ears and I have obeyed, I did not turn away... My vindicator is at my side. Who would dare accuse me? Let us confront each other!”* **I invite us to wonder with Isaiah: In what space (what relationship or obligation) do you find it really challenging to stay fully engaged?** May Isaiah encourage us to know our strengths and to attune to God’s Holy Loving Spirit on a daily basis so that we can dig down roots in self-determination while also keeping our feet in the fire of community.

Let’s turn to the reading from James. We heard the following metaphor comparing the human tongue (meaning speech) to a bridled horse or the rudder of a ship: *“Once we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we control the rest of their bodies. The same with ships – no matter how large they are, and even if they are driven by fierce winds, they are directed by a very small rudder to wherever the captain wants to go. The tongue is like that. It’s a small part of the body, yet it makes great boasts. See how tiny the spark is that sets a huge forest ablaze!”* We can share in the writer’s recognition that human speech can have powerful impact – even a single word.

James continues: *“The tongue is such a flame... We use it to say, ‘Praised be our God and Creator’; then we use it to curse each other – we who are created in the image of God. Blessing and curse come out of the same mouth. This shouldn’t be, my sisters and brothers! Does a spring emit both pure water and brackish water? My sisters and brothers, can a fig tree produce olives, or can a grapevine produce figs? No – and neither can a fountain produce both salt water and fresh water.”* The writer encourages us to practice discipline in our speech, working toward speech that is fresh and vital (like a tree, a spring, a fountain) instead of stagnant and brackish. **We exercise self-determination by controlling our speech. What good comes of that? We get to put the best of ourselves out there into the world.** Warnings we hear and repeat about how we can’t take back something we’ve said typically relate to brackish speech. Let’s lean into saying fresh, vital things that we also can’t take back!

Let’s turn to our reading from the gospel of Mark. We heard an account about Jesus anticipating aloud his future challenges: *“Then Jesus began to teach them that the Promised One had to suffer much, be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and religious scholars, be put to death, and rise again three days later. Jesus said these things quite openly.”* Peter felt understandably disturbed by what Jesus shared. He wanted to change Jesus’ mind. Peter was offering a first century version of this scolding: ‘If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.’ Well, Jesus wasn’t much for holding back on sharing his truth.

Mark continues with Jesus doubling down on explaining to his disciples that he knew he would almost certainly suffer and die for the cause of the gospel news of God’s extravagant love.

Jesus was remembered as saying something like this: *“What would you gain if you were to win the whole world but lose yourself in the process? What can you offer in exchange for your soul?”* Jesus encourages us to speak plainly, truthfully about our experiences – even when our voice might be shaking (perhaps especially when our voice is shaking). We exercise self-determination when we refuse to let ungodly (unloving) powers silence our truth. What good comes of that? Well, people can trust us if they know we will speak our truth, salted with love.

Approximately once per year, I share with you a reading that has been very influential in my life as a daughter, sister, mother, friend, in the past as an outdoor ministry professional and elementary school teacher, and at present as a pastor. It is an excerpt from an essay entitled *“The Transformation of Fear,”* by twentieth century North American psychologist, author and teacher, Danaan Parry. The author speaks to the zones of transition we experience in life and the deep trust that living in the present moment requires. He was appreciated internationally for his work in conflict resolution and particularly for his approach and practice of seeing the humanity in an opponent. I will share an abridged version of the reading this morning. I invite you to welcome these words to speak to your experience of our communal moment of transition and growth as a merged congregation or to a transition and area of growth in your own life. I invite you to close your eyes and let this fall as a blessing. *“Fear of Transformation,”* by Danaan Parry.

*“Sometimes I feel that my life is a series of trapeze swings. I’m either hanging on to a trapeze bar, swinging along; or, for a few moments, I’m hurtling across space in between bars. Most of the time, I’m hanging on to my trapeze bar of the moment. It carries me along at a certain steady rate of swing and I have the feeling that I’m in control of my life.*

*But once in a while, I look ahead of me into the distance and I see another bar swinging toward me. It's empty and I know, in that place in me that knows, that this new trapeze bar has my name on it. It is my next step, my growth, my aliveness coming to get me. I know that I must release my grip on the present, well-known bar to move to the new one. Each time, I am filled with terror. Each time, I am afraid I will miss. But I do it anyway. Perhaps this is the essence of what the mystics call the faith experience. No guarantees, no net, no insurance policy, but you do it anyway because somehow to keep hanging on to that old bar is no longer an alternative.*

*And so I soar across the dark void. It's called transition. I have noticed that in [many] culture[s], this transition zone is looked upon as a nothing, a no-place between places that must be gotten through as fast and as unconsciously as possible. What a waste! The transition zones in our lives are incredibly rich places. They should be honored, even savored. Even with all the pain and fear and feelings of being out-of-control that can accompany transitions, they are still the most alive, most growth-filled, most expansive moments of our lives. They can also be enlightening, in the true sense of the word. Hurtling through the void, we just may learn how to fly." Wise words from Danaan Parry.*

Especially in this moment of transition for our congregation (a multivalent moment of transition), may we lean into God's expansive love. With Isaiah, may we know our strengths that lead us toward self-determination. With James, may we be encouraged to be disciplined and say what we intend. And with Jesus, may we speak our truth in love – even if our voice is shaking. God's expansive love is counting on each and all of us. Amen!

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September 15, 2024 (17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Isaiah 50:4-9a, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-37