

Sunday, July 12, 2020 - Do You *Really* Want to Be Free?

Good morning. Welcome to our online Sunday Celebration Service. My name is Rev. Diana Johnson, and I am the Pastor and Spiritual Director of Mystic Heart Spiritual Center.

This month our topic is *Free to Be Me*, in honor of Independence Day. Chris and I spoke about *Opening to Possibility*, last week during the Taize, because until we are open to greater possibilities in our lives, we won't experience them. This week it occurs to me that I have been writing all month so far about Spiritual Liberation or Spiritual Freedom, and about being awake, but I haven't really talked about what that means to me...what is it that I am really talking about?

What does it mean to be spiritually free? How does one become free? And what does spiritual freedom mean for our daily lives? It sure sounds good...the ideal of Freedom is what our country was founded on...the dream that we continue to work toward, even today. None of us want to feel limited by another...I want to be free to be me, don't you?

What is it that leads us to the pursuit of Enlightenment or Spiritual Freedom? I can only speak for myself, but maybe you have had a similar experience. Somewhere in very early adulthood, I started to feel like there was something missing from my life. I couldn't tell what it was. My life looked like a lot of other people's lives...I was in college, I had a job, an apartment, and a dream that someday there would be more to my life than that. A few more years went by...a divorce, another marriage, a baby...and still, my life felt very small...very limited. I remember feeling trapped...feeling almost the repetitive feeling of my life. Somewhere inside, I felt like there was a lot more possible, but I didn't know how to get to it.

This is how I was raised...everyone struggling to make ends meet, no real direction, no talk of hope for anything better. Even if you haven't had that exact experience...even if life has been pretty good, have you ever felt like your day-to-day experience is too small a box to spend the rest of your time on this planet in? What I believe sets us on a Spiritual Path is that we start to realize there is a lot more possible. At least this is what I experienced. I was no longer satisfied by what I was experiencing. I begin looking for another way, something more expansive and uplifting. And you know what happens when Spirit feels us reaching for something bigger...It reaches back. Life presents opportunities for us to stretch. I've been stretching ever since.

In my 29th year, after beginning to study Religious Science, I came across an idea that was new to me...what was this new idea? *Enlightenment*. Of course, I couldn't quite imagine *that* as a possibility...that was only for gurus and saints...but I could wrap my mind around *Freedom, Liberation*, and the thought of being completely free was very appealing.

We think we want Spiritual Liberation, don't we? It sounds good...but we don't really know what it is. And sometimes, when we find out what it is, and what it means for our lives, we're not sure that we really want it after all. We all know that if we really *want* something, it is much easier to attain. But if we don't *really* want it, we're not going to make that much effort to get it. It doesn't excite us to work for it. Spiritual Liberation is like that...if you're not sure you want it, or

maybe haven't looked into enough to know for sure...it feels like a lot of work. So I think it is helpful for us to determine what it is, and that we actually want it, before setting off along our path.

So, what exactly do we mean by *Spiritual Liberation*, or *Spiritual Freedom*? Just like anything we might be talking about, this subject has its own language...its own vocabulary. And there are many ways that different traditions define these words. So, I'm going to clarify exactly what I mean by the terminology I am using.

Let's look first at *Awakening*. In my daily messages, I conclude by saying 'May we all be Awake...' by my definition, if you are listening to a message like this, you are awake. You realize that there is another possibility for your life than the social or cultural storyline that is prevalent...that the conventional wisdom or story is not necessarily the only way to live a life. You recognize that there is more possible than you can possibly imagine. And I believe that Awakening happens over and over again. I (or any of us) can be living within a particular story...let's call it my story bubble, and at some point, I step out beyond the boundary. At first it is uncomfortable, but gradually I step toward the next concentric bubble, and then beyond that boundary. If I believe that God, Life, or the Universe is infinite, this can go on forever.

The beginning of the journey is *Awakening*. Continuing the journey means expanding into new possibilities forever. And *Spiritual Liberation* is what allows me to expand into new possibilities. If my spirit isn't free, if it is bound up, there is only so far I can go. Once I attain a certain amount of spiritual freedom, the amount of spiritual freedom that I have attained is what dictates how available I am to expand into new possibilities. So, the liberated state is what makes me available for new possibilities...it is not stuck in the way things are, the way it's always been.

Okay, so *Awakening* is the recognition that something else, something greater, is always possible. And *Spiritual Liberation* is what allows me to keep expanding to greater and greater possibilities. But what do I mean by *Spiritual*? *Spirit* comes from a root that originally meant *wind* or *breath*. So, let's think for a moment about the wind...imagine it's a windy day, and you can see the leaves moving around. Everybody knows that the wind is blowing the leaves, but of course you don't see the wind...you just see the leaves moving around and you attribute the moving to the wind.

So, in the same way, if we look at each other, I'm moving around...so we could say that something is moving me, and the thing that is moving me is my spirit. The spirit is moving me. This actually goes back to ancient times. If you were in ancient Greece and you got into a fight with someone and you were angry, you wouldn't say, "I got angry", but "the god of anger got into me, or took me over." If I fell in love, then the god of love got into me. Actions were attributed to spirits taking over our movement. So, *spirit and spiritual always refers to that which moves us*. When we start on an authentic spiritual quest, one of your own choosing...not one we are conditioned into...once we decide for ourselves that there is more possible, it is going to move us.

In order to pursue that path, we have to stretch beyond our conditioning. If you ever want to experience your own conditioning, just try to do something that is socially unacceptable and pay attention to your own psychology. There are emotional hurdles that we will need to jump over when we decide to act outside of our cultural norms. What creates the hurdles? First, we have habit patterns that pull us back into conformity like a piece of tight elastic when you stretch it beyond its normal reach. Not only that, but it is disruptive to everyone around us when we go against cultural norms...we get kick-back, sometimes in the form of judgment, sometimes in physical action...people saying and doing things to try to stop us.

That's why I ask...do you really want to be free? Or maybe the more accurate question is how free do you want to be, how far beyond cultural norms do you want to live?

Let me first say that just because I can choose to live beyond cultural norms, doesn't mean that I would choose to, or that it is a good idea to. I don't believe that there is any inherent benefit to living outside of convention, just for the sake of living outside of convention. But I also don't believe...these are my beliefs, and you may disagree...you can't be truly happy unless you're free. You can't be truly happy with the life you're living unless you are *free to live it*...because it's an *authentic choice*. Otherwise, there will always be some part of you, either conscious or unconscious, that will be stifled.

Spiritual Freedom is about the freedom of my spirit...it means I am free to choose to live the life that I want to live. It may be conventional or not, but whatever it looks like, I am choosing it. And suddenly, I begin to realize that I am completely *responsible* for how I live. I can no longer blame convention. I can no longer complain. It is what I am choosing. There is nothing and no one pushing me into it. The more free I am, the more responsibility I need to assume for the life that I'm living, the less I have the room to complain and to feel victimized by the life that I'm living, because I chose it. And if I don't like it, I can do something else.

Many people feel that they are stuck in a life that they don't like...that they victimized by, and for one reason or another they feel that they can't do anything else. This is never the case for the truly Liberated person.

There are lots of things in my life that I do, that I would prefer not to, and I have all kinds of reasons why I feel like I need to do them...but at the core, I know I don't have to. I know I could walk away from it all. It's always an option...for me or for anybody. I could always start again. There is no job that cannot be quit, there is no circumstance that cannot be gotten out of. Granted, sometimes there are natural consequences that must unfold before we move on...another part of our responsibility. But ultimately, we are free to make changes; and when we don't, we have compelling reasons why and we take responsibility for those, as well. Spiritual Freedom recognizes that it is always a choice.

So, let's go back to our theme for the month...*Free to Be Me*. This takes on a whole new meaning than what we might have thought. *Spiritual Liberation, True Freedom* is not strictly about

expressing my personality, no matter what anyone else thinks. This kind of expression has been mistaken for authenticity. While True Authenticity includes the personality, it is more about expressing our Individuality, our unique way of expressing the Divine in the world. The word authentic has a Latin root that means *indisputable origin*. Expressing my authentic self is expressing my *God Self*. In being *Free to Be Me*, I am always at choice...I am always responsible for my thoughts, words, and actions. Do you really want to be free?

“But wait a minute,” the mind says. “There *are* limits...why are you telling me there are no limits? Just look around you, look at the world.” We all want there to be no limits until we find out there actually aren’t any, and then, all of a sudden, we want the limits back.

Very few people are ready to step into a radical freedom, a freedom rooted in God, and to live from there. We are deeply conditioned to not live that way. This is why spiritual practice can help us. The Practice that I have begun teaching this past week is designed to support, or to help us embrace, Spiritual Freedom. If you’re interested in learning more, feel free to join us this coming Wednesday for our Radical Optimism class where we are learning a No Problem/No Preference Meditation that can absolutely lead to Spiritual Liberation.

For now, please join me as we close in prayer.