

This We Know: Promises for People of Faith & Doubt *Called to Freedom*

Galatians 5:1, 13-16

July 7, 2024

Have you ever been in the car with someone as they're having a conversation? You feel a little left out, and you can't help but try to fill in what's being said on the other side of the phone.

Well, this is the situation that we are in as we read Paul's letters in the New Testament. We're listening closely, trying to fill in the conversation and situation from the other side, because what he's saying to that church long ago matters deeply to us today. He's talking about freedom. *How* are we to *live* in freedom? This is a lesson that we never stop learning. There are always new Pharaohs, new rulers, eager for our obedience in exchange for meager portions of what they or we think that we need. There's always new influencers, eager to fill the minds of others with thoughts of themselves—*their* ideas, *their* opinions of who we are or should be.

But the truth is that we are made for *freedom*. This truth is deep in our bones, and over time, it begins to burn with passion when our freedom is not honored. This is the truth about which Nina Simone sang in the anthem "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free." It's the truth to which Dr. Martin Luther King referred when he said that "truth crushed to the earth will rise again." Our urge to be free is so strong that "nothing on earth can stop (us) from feeling (that we were) born for liberty," a hard won slice of wisdom from factory worker and Christian mystic, Simone Weil.

The struggle for freedom in the Bible goes back almost to the very beginning, and it does not conclude until the very end. Our freedom faces twin threats: external and internal threats, each of which seeks to undermine our true source of freedom, which is God.

And so, let's take a closer look at these barriers to freedom, and then at the path and picture which Paul gives us of what freedom looks like in action. But before we do that, we need to ask: what *is* freedom? It's a hard thing to define. I think if we put ten of us in a row, we would get ten different definitions of what freedom is. Actually, we're Presbyterians, so if you put ten people in a row, you would have fifteen definitions of what freedom is.

Freedom is often thought of as freedom "from." Freedom *from* some oppressive weight or force. Freedom *from* debt, from depression, from isolation, from illness. Freedom *from* a difficult situation at home, at work. Freedom from the rat race. Freedom from the constant competition of having to keep up with the Joneses or coming up on top.

But here's the problem with narrowing our definition to simply *from*. The vacuum left by the absence of these things is filled by new ones. The wisdom of Jesus' parable in Luke's Gospel is just this: when one evil spirit leaves a person, the empty space is filled with seven others, making the situation far worse than before.

We can't simply pursue freedom *from*. Again and again, throughout Scripture, God shows us that freedom is primarily freedom *for*. Freedom is an opportunity *for* something. But what exactly is it an opportunity *for*?

Well, this is where the internal threat to freedom comes in. Freed from external constraints, what will we do? "Whatever we want" is one possible option. Paul warns us of the consequence of using freedom's opportunity for self-indulgence. And he's not just being a strict schoolmaster. He's simply pointing out the natural consequences of everyone looking out for number one,

doing whatever we want. In our life together, when we each seek our own self-interest, whatever satisfaction we may find is short-lived at best. In the wake of self-indulgence is social chaos. People, as Paul says, end up “biting and devouring each other” to get what they want.

On the Fourth of July this past week, my son Luke was interested in watching something together that related to the American Revolution. And so, we dove a little bit into John Adams’ story. In dreaming of our nation’s future, John Adams understood that freedom is not simply freedom *from* external constraints. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, he reflects that, “Passions are the same in all men, under all forms of simple government, and when unchecked, produce the same effects of fraud, violence, and cruelty. When clear prospects are opened before vanity, pride, avarice, or ambition, for their easy gratification, it is hard for the most considerate philosophers and the most conscientious moralists to resist the temptation.”

Adams saw what Paul before him saw: the way to true freedom is not found by throwing off all constraints and pursuing whatever we want. That is simply exchanging an external constraint for an internal one—namely, the “god of our bellies.” When we live lives of self-indulgence, short-lived satisfaction is quickly eclipsed by an insatiable need for more. The things we pursue end up enslaving us. We need more and more. What we own ends up owning us. What you pursue becomes the god that you serve, requiring more and more of you until there’s nothing left. At the end of the day, what have we actually gained? Jesus asks us, “What good is it to gain the world, and forfeit (your) soul?” (Mark 8:36)

Now the tricky thing here is that we desire *good* things. We want good things. It’s why we’re drawn to them—because they’re good! But, as St. Augustine points out, they’re harmful not because they are bad, but because they are good things loved in the wrong order or in the wrong way. They are, as he says, *disordered loves*. Food, companionship, respect, self-worth. These are good things, but loved in the wrong order and at all costs in the wrong way, their pursuit can hurt not only

us but everyone around us. Disordered loves wreak havoc on individuals and communities.

Freedom must be about more than simply being free of all external and internal constraints to pursue whatever we want. And that’s because we were created, and are created, in the image of God. Whatever freedom we have, therefore, is in the image and likeness of *God’s freedom*. And we learn in the Bible that God is not simply free *from* but primarily free *for*.

Free *for* creating beautiful things out of nothing. Free *for* loving God’s creation, even when it turns against Him. In Jesus Christ, we see God’s freedom to not wait for His love to be reciprocated or earned. No, in Christ we see God’s freedom to love even those who hate Him, to love us even as we are crucifying him. In Jesus we see God’s freedom to disregard the social taboos of the most religious in order to show God’s favor for people cast out of religious circles. Freedom is *for*, in a word, *love*.

God’s freedom is lived out and expressed relationally, in relation to us. God shows us who God is and what freedom looks like through uncoerced acts of free and steadfast love showered upon us, again and again and again and again. God’s love is free. It’s not dependent on us living up to this or that standard. God loves us, not out of obligation, not to reward us for our good religion or best behavior, not because we have done this or accomplished that. God is *free* of all of that. “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” When we are at our best, God loves us. When we are at our worst, God loves us. God’s freedom is expressed in God’s unbound and eternal love.

Paul is saying that we are free in precisely this same way. Yet, too often we remain tied up and imprisoned by internal and external barriers to freedom. But whether we are pressed in from the outside or are our own worst enemies, *the way out is love*. Freedom is the opportunity to love. To misuse freedom’s opportunity for self-indulgence or our own ends—rather than to love—is to be a prisoner who chooses to remain in his cell, even though the door is open.

So, what happens when we make the decision to walk through that door? Fruit grows. Fruit grows in the way that Paul describes them. *Relational fruit*. Fruit like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. This is what freedom in Christ looks like in action. The presence of these fruit is a sure sign that we are living by the Spirit, abiding in Christ, engaged in his way of life, branches whose life is drawn from the vine. The absence of these fruit should give us pause; they should move us to ask seriously whether we have gone off course, whether we are no longer sailing by the winds of the Holy Spirit.

“Second Presbyterian Church is a welcoming community of faith where Jesus Christ transforms lives.” That is our mission statement. It is what we aspire to be and to become. We are here to be transformed by Jesus Christ, so that we might bear spiritual fruit for the good of everyone around us. Like branches of a healthy fruit tree, we need to be well nourished by streams of living water, so that we may be free to bear the relational fruit of the Spirit.

These are fruit that no money can buy. No one can achieve or produce them on their own. They are *God’s* fruit, which grow as we love our neighbors, even as we love ourselves, with patience, with kindness. When we rein in self-indulgence and replace it with self-control, when we exchange irritability with patience and gratitude for the gift of the person in front of us, when we live like this, God’s fruit grows in us.

Now, this kind of fruit takes *time* to grow. It doesn’t grow over night. As pastor Eugene Peterson remarked, “If I want a potato for dinner tonight, it will do me no good to plant it this morning.” Like all good fruit, the fruit of the Spirit requires careful tending over time, day by day, until by God’s grace it is fully grown.

Our freedom, like God’s freedom, is expressed in taking every opportunity we have, every day, to love each other as God has loved us. It is that kind of freedom that we were created for, and which bears fruit that lasts. Amen.