

February 7th, 2021

1 Corinthians 9:16-23 “Just Because You Can ...”

The topic on the table this week is “freedom.” It’s a complicated topic, especially during this shift that we’re in. We value our freedom. We recognize that it’s part of our DNA as human beings. We appreciate that it’s one of the founding principles of our nation. But it is complicated. For example, we want freedom of speech, but then you’ve got to contend with those who would want the freedom to say whatever they want even if it’s false. On the other side of that, we want freedom of speech, but then we want to suppress people who we don’t agree with. See what I mean when I say it’s complicated? The Bible tells us that God gives us freedom. We are given the choice whether to follow God or not. We are given the freedom to make good choices and poor choices. In Genesis, we see how God gave Adam and Eve the choice to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil even though God told them not to. Were there consequences? For sure. In our Bible study on I Samuel, we see that God gave the people the choice whether to have a king or not even though God told them that they didn’t need a king. The Israelites chose to ignore God and have a king anyway. Which, you know ... we wouldn’t be having so much fun studying I Samuel if they chose to listen to God, right?

What we have in front of us this morning is a portion of a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. He spent a lot of time on the subject of freedom. Earlier in the chapter, Paul is saying, “I might be free to do anything, but that doesn’t mean everything is a good idea. Don’t use your superior freedom in ways that cause others to stumble.” In today’s scripture, Paul says, “I may make the gospel free of charge so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel.” Paul likes to walk on the tightrope doesn’t he? He says, “Yes, we’re free. Just don’t overdo your freedom.”

It’s been awhile since I’ve shared a “preacher secret” with you, but I have to do it now and then to help you understand that we who are in

ministry are as fallible as the next person. Preachers, for the most part, recognize that Paul is a little more hard-nosed than Jesus. He probably had to be. Jesus didn't have to deal with the church. He left that to his disciples when he commissioned them to go into the world and proclaim good news. So yeah, we know that Paul had to tighten the reins a bit. Especially with churches who struggled and stumbled like the Corinthian church. But as much as we recognize that Paul had to tighten the reins, there's a part of us who want to tighten the reins even more than Paul. That's because we walk a tightrope too. We preachers *want* to proclaim the freedom of Christ. Honestly, we do. But we're also scared to death that this will lead to the kind of anarchy that might split the community!

So what is freedom really? Is it a bit of an illusion? Just a redrawing of the boundaries? Is it really more like the "freedom" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*? The freedom to be blissfully happy and healthy and comfortable and entertained all the time so long as you live in absolute conformity to the rules that protect the balance of this nirvana? Is that what's really going on when Paul describes Christ as "the end of the law?" And then he turns around and said there's a new law, the law of Christ, the law of love. Are we *really* free, or are we *not*?

Here's an example: I am sure that I am ethically free to have a beer without causing any offence to God. But that doesn't mean that I should regard myself as free to walk into an AA meeting, crack open a bottle and say, "Cheers" to the folks gathered there. What Paul wants to stress is the voluntary nature of this limitation of our freedom. If you think of it only in terms of the loss of your freedom to have a beer every time you feel like it, then you will persuade yourself that your freedom is being eroded. But if you think of it in terms of being set free to love your brothers and sisters for whom alcohol is a threat, then you'd be coming closer to the meaning of freedom in Christ.

I discovered something. If I don't drink beer, I lose weight. Which means if I drink beer, I gain weight! So I choose not to drink beer

because my body benefits. So if I just approach the question of freedom philosophically, I'd come to the conclusion that I am not truly free in any absolute sense. I can't have the beer and be mindful of my brothers and sisters who struggle with alcoholism at the same time. I have to choose one or the other. There are laws of the physical universe, even my own little bodily universe, that limit my freedom to claim both this freedom and that freedom at the same time. For me, not drinking beer is just a voluntary commitment. For the alcoholic, it would be a pitched battle. And this is where the rubber really hits the road in our quest to clarify what freedom means and what it looks like.

Freedom as an abstract concept is not really very helpful because it has very little to do with life as we actually live it. Theoretical absolute freedom would presumably mean freedom from things like the laws of gravity too, but such theories have little relevance to our actual lives. Freedom as an abstract concept always seems to mean "freedom from." From what? Freedom from the other, freedom to live my life without regard to what anyone else thinks, wants or needs. The freedom that Jesus offers us is not an abstract freedom *from* others, but a freedom *for*. Freedom *for* God, *for* others, *for* love.

You see, whenever anyone has ever gotten close to any kind of absolute freedom from everything — from every constraining relationship, expectation or cultural norm — they don't experience it as freedom at all. Or at least not as any kind of freedom that could be regarded as a gift. Instead they experience it as lostness, rootlessness, aimlessness, meaninglessness. It's more like the freedom to keep falling into a hole without anyone being there to catch you.

In the real world, we don't just stand there with meaningless freedom to choose either good or evil. Mostly our choices are shaped by the patterns of choices that we've been exposed to since birth and what we experience all around us. We find ourselves desiring what we see others desiring. Not wanting ... *desiring*. When Eve stood at the tree in the Garden of Eden, her choice was shaped by the *desire* of the serpent. And

then when Adam approached the tree, he just imitated the pattern of desire he saw. “Ooh yeah ... I want that ... I *need* that” and so on and so on and so on. So we find ourselves not really free at all. We find ourselves overwhelmingly pushed towards choosing badly ... wrongly.

So when we see people protesting and proclaiming that black lives matter, when we see people who are lost in the pit of despair, when we see people who are homeless whether by choice or not, when we see people who are across the aisle politically, socially, economically ... whatever sets you apart from the “other” ... when we see this, we can choose the fruit of hospitality or the fruit of hostility. We’ve got a choice! But again, we often make choices by imitating patterns that we see. We all too readily imitate one another’s fearful rejection of the stranger ... the “other.” And when someone lashes out and wounds us and we can choose to eat the fruit of mercy and reconciliation or to eat the fruit of vengeance and retribution, we’re all too quick to imitate the wounding we receive and pass it on with interest. And believe me when I say that in the midst of this shift that is marked by divisiveness and polarization, when we imitate the patterns that we see going on around us, we are not advancing the agenda of God’s reign. We are not proclaiming Good News. We are not imitating Christ. This is not the freedom that Jesus came to offer us.

Freedom is not simply a matter of being able to choose, but to choose well, to choose rightly. It’s a freedom from all that would oppress and obstruct you from being all you could otherwise be. It’s a freedom from all that binds you and weighs you down and presses you into the mold of contagious fearfulness and hostility. It’s a freedom from possessiveness and bitterness and jealousy. It is Jesus meeting the sick and disabled and marginalized outside his door and setting them free from all that binds them to a life that is less than the life they were created to live. It is Jesus meeting you at the door and wanting to set you free from all that prevents you from choosing rightly ... you are free to live generously and expansively and joyfully.

So when we hear Paul talking this week about his freedom to “become all things to all people,” he’s not talking about the valueless imitation of “when in Rome, do as the Romans do.” It’s not “when with the violent, do as the violent do” and “when with the selfish and indulgent, do as they do.” Paul is not advocating the freedom to do as one pleases, and selfishly indulge one’s every desires. What he *is* talking about is the freedom to freely lay aside one’s own ways and desires in order to freely be *for* the other.

Freedom in Christ is not freedom from every expectation or obligation. Rather, it is a specific way of relationship. In Christ, we are set free *from* our tendencies to imitate one another in a downward spiral of jealousy and hostility. We’re set free *to* imitate Jesus. Freedom in Christ is the freedom to reconcile, freedom to liberate, freedom to forgive. It is the freedom to begin doing these things when everything around you would herd you in the opposite direction. That’s the kind of freedom we are invited into when we choose to follow Christ. And that’s what the Table is about too. When we gather here at the table of the Lord, we are invited to freely receive that which has been freely given by Christ. Take. Receive. Forgive. Be forgiven. Love freely.