

Freedom, Glorious Freedom

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

I Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When is freedom too much freedom? After all, we treasure our freedom. We yearn for it when we don't seem to have it. Freedom—like when a child finally grows into adulthood and leaves home for his first apartment. He recalls those years when, bound by curfews, rules, and parental maxims like, “Vegetables are good for you,” he stomped to his room, all the while muttering under his breath, “Just wait till I'm on my own. No one telling me what to do. I'll leave my dirty clothes on the floor. I'll eat whatever and whenever I want. I can't wait till I'm completely free.” So he doesn't care if his dirty socks pile up in the corners. And he eats an Italian sub with the works, hot peppers included, at 2 in the morning—so what if Mom told him he'd get indigestion by doing so. There's no doubt he's enjoying that taste of freedom.

But when is it too much freedom? This is one of the questions Paul struggled to answer in his letter to the churches at Galatia, a portion of which is our 2nd lesson today. Paul had his work cut out for him. He founded those Galatian churches, proclaimed to them the love and mercy of God revealed in Jesus Christ, until they were steady on their feet as Christian fellowships. Then he left them to continue his missionary work in other places, and other missionaries entered Galatia and began to mislead the congregations with teachings contrary to the Gospel message. Paul attempted in this letter to bring the Galatians back to the good news of Christ.

And the argument surrounds the whole issue of what Christian freedom is. When Paul began his work in Galatia, the people found his words liberating—how God sent his Son into the world to reconcile with and constantly his people. The Galatians were now free from their pagan past—all those superstitions and fears, the demons who tormented, and the many gods and goddesses who demanded their allegiance and sacrifice, oblations and submission. Now there was but One God—and **he** could be trusted. He was not so demanding as he was giving, and he loved his children. This freedom he offered in Christ felt wonderful.

But as we imperfect humans are want to do, we take a good thing and warp it. After an initial period of enthusiasm living with this gracious freedom under Christ's rule, the Galatians began to run into problems, and Paul wasn't around to offer advice. The freedom to live in the Spirit of Christ came into radical conflict with the challenging realities of daily life. How is one faithful to God when, with all this freedom, one is free to go astray? Is there a set of rules to guide and direct? What rituals will appease this God, should he get angry for their occasional or frequent glitches, mistakes, outright transgressions? In other words, what are the parameters of this freedom?

Those of us who are parents have learned the necessity of setting parameters, of allowing freedom for our children to develop, but not an open-ended freedom where their safety is compromised. Carolyn and Gene, while Eugene is in the non-crawling stage, you can have that vase on the corner stand, that lit candle on the coffee table with little problem. But when Eugene begins to crawl, you have to set reasonable parameters that allow him to explore and learn and grow, without his getting hurt, or hurting something or someone else. You have to figure out how much freedom is too much freedom. So the vase may need to be put away for a few years. Let go the ambience of a candle. Put a barrier at the steps. You as his parents are charged with the awesome responsibility of making wise decisions in this regard, and it will seem as if every single day, your discernment is required once more. For you have made promises to care for Eugene's well-being.

Now, there are times we misjudge in our parameter-setting. Randy and I neglected to move some of our books to a higher shelf when our first child began to crawl. I don't know exactly what Sarah did with the last page of Tom Clancy's novel, *Hunt for Red October*. But she must have ripped it out. If she ate it, it didn't make her sick. Plus, I'm glad we saw the movie—we know what happened at the end. Sarah had a little too much freedom in our living room, I do believe. The truth is, eventually, no matter how hard you try to make it a safe world for Eugene, the parameters you set might just fail or be the wrong ones. When is it the right time to buy Legos for Eugene—little tiny you-can-pop-them-in-your-mouth-if-you-don't-know-any-better Legos—and sell the big, can't-possibly-put-in-your-mouth-and-choke-on-them Duplos at your first yard sale? You can't give him Legos at 18 months. But you can't deny him Legos at age 13.

I guess you could say the Galatians, on their own without Paul's guidance, are facing the potential of having Legos when they are much too young. They are free in Christ, and facing a world full of temptation, a world full of hostility, a world ripe with selfish and destructive possibilities. The absence of any parameters seemed only to lead the Galatians to misconduct. So, where once they yearned to be free, now they began to yearn for something to hold them in check. So there is Paul, far away, and into the region of Galatia come some other missionaries—Jewish-Christian missionaries like Paul. But that's where the similarity ended. They were concerned that Paul's teachings, along with the absence of any laws, would result in moral anarchy. The marquee would read *Galatians Gone Wild*. These missionaries, however, could offer concrete help and advice to the Galatian churches. What they offered was the Torah, the Jewish code of law. Now, while there is no doubt that the 10 Commandments and other rules help guide and direct a person in living faithfully (in fact, Carolyn and Gene have promised to teach their son Eugene those very commandments), these missionaries implied that in order for the Galatians to keep themselves pure from all that could possibly defile them, in order to become really OK with God as his children, they needed to take up the rituals of cleanliness, the calendar of sacrifices, the circumcision of all males. They must obey the Torah to the letter. **Those are the only acceptable parameters.**

So, can we understand their confusion and predicament? When is freedom just too much freedom, or no freedom at all? Think about that young man in his first apartment. The freedom to eat a whole Italian sub at 2 in the morning might result in a wild night of bad dreams and an upset stomach. (The Pepto-Bismol? It's back home with Mom. He wishes now he had it.) But

he's free, right? Of course, that's nothing compared to the freedom of a young man in his first apartment, and his decision to bring not an Italian sub but a young woman into his apartment at 2 in the morning. (If Mom knew, **she'd** probably need the Pepto-Bismol . . .)

So, yes, Paul had his work cut out for him here. What he tells the congregations in this letter is that, no matter what they choose to do, they are putting on the yoke of slavery. See, they think they have to choose between two extremes: The wild, destructive, selfish freedom, which offers opportunity to sin and which weighs down the soul, or, on the other hand, the burden of the many involved and intricate laws of the Torah which no human could possibly fulfill. Paul says both of these extremes render freedom null and void.

Then you need to hear the next verses which were omitted here: *Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you . . . For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision or uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith made effective through love.*

See, Paul saw absolutely no reason to take up Jewish laws and rituals, since it is only Christ who can forgive and save and make a person OK with God. Requiring obedience to the Torah in its many complex rules was like having Mom move in to her son's first apartment. She really didn't belong there, and her presence negated the freeing effect of her son getting his own apartment in the first place.

No, Paul did not wish the Galatians to be enslaved by the Law. But neither did he wish them to abuse the freedom given them in Christ. So Paul corrects their misunderstanding about freedom. He tells them they have been given the freedom that enables them to choose to do good. They have been given the very Spirit of Christ, and the fruit of that Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The freedom they have been given is the freedom Christ practiced. It is not a "Do your own thing," but a "Do Christ's thing." Ironically, Paul says, in order to preserve the freedom which Christ has given them, they must exercise it. And the only way to exercise it is to exercise love. He writes: *For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.* Freedom is not everyone seeking his or her own good, but a matter of everyone seeking the good for one another. The way Jesus himself always sought the good for the other.

Those are the parameters of Christian freedom. Those are the parameters Carolyn and Gene have promised to set for Eugene through the coming years. Those are the most important parameters they will ever set for their son. And they've made those promises before God at this baptism. They have promised to seek the good continually for Eugene, not to elevate themselves or satisfy their own needs, but in order to help him grow in faith and love. In order for the fruit of the Spirit to flourish in him. In order to help him grow closer to God who, this day, has adopted him as his very own. **AMEN.**