

“DANGEROUS FREEDOM”

Galatians 5:1, 13-25 Luke 9:51-62

“*For freedom Christ has set us free.*” These words of Paul sound like the perfect 4th of July sermon text. It also might sound like the perfect topic for a congregation which is to be free from pastoral leadership!

It *is* a good time to think about freedom. In this nation we are grateful for the freedom we have; we pride ourselves on our freedom, and we wish others could enjoy it, as well. Who doesn’t think of freedom as the greatest of blessings; an awesome and wonderful privilege?

And it is, of course; but, as the Apostle Paul warns us, freedom is also profoundly dangerous. And not just because young women and men die every day to preserve the security of their nation. Freedom is dangerous because it leaves the one who is free vulnerable; with nothing to protect them from failure or folly or terribly wrong choices. What parent has not feared in the freedom granted a sixteen-year-old son or daughter set free on the highways with a newly-acquired driver’s license?

Freedom is our highest hope, yet it is dangerous because – though it means nothing prevents us from putting into action exquisitely creative ideas, it also means that nothing and no one prevents us from disastrously poor decisions. Freedom is lightness itself, and yet nothing is heavier: when we are free, there is no one to do the work that needs to be done except us. We can’t expect our parents to take care of us, we can’t blame the government for what does or does not happen; there is just everything that needs to be done... and us. And the more we are aware of the world around us – all the suffering, injustice and brokenness there is, the heavier our freedom can seem. Freedom is bigger than individuals; bigger than churches; bigger, even, than countries—at least the freedom that Christ offers is. Yet how we would like it to be easy and simple.

Professor Higgins, in “My Fair Lady,” reflects a common notion of freedom when he defines himself as “an ordinary man who desires nothing more than just an ordinary chance to live exactly as I like and do precisely what I want.”

This is, of course, absurd, for anyone can see that this kind of freedom would deny all freedom for everyone else. Yet I wonder how often we unconsciously seek this very kind of oppressive freedom?

How different is freedom in Christ; for in it we learn that we *cannot* do exactly what we want if we also care what *others* need and want. Paradoxically, if we truly care about others often we will choose *not* to do what we want. That is freedom in Christ.

So here we are, you and I, about to be set free: you from pastoral leadership for a time; and me from a ministry I was just about to understand. How exhilarating, this freedom, and how terrifying!

I remember what the last day of school before summer felt like when I was a kid. We used to chant, “*School’s out; school’s out. Teacher let the monkeys out!*” We were

overjoyed, but we now know that this was nothing less than a litany of horror for our parents!

When Paul wrote about freedom in Christ he knew that freedom of any kind creates a void. He knew how quickly and urgently we tend to fill empty spots in our lives—even those created by freedom.

We folks in the mainline churches wonder why our ranks are diminishing and our pews are becoming emptier. Worse yet, we wonder why, at the same time, the “big box” churches are growing by leaps and bounds. There are no doubt many reasons for this, but I believe one reason might be fear of freedom. In a world that seems increasingly frightening to many, our Reformed Tradition continues to call us to great freedom and great responsibility. We are taught in the preliminary principles of our Book of Order that “*God alone is lord of the conscience.*”¹ A lovely phrase; but it means that each one of us can never rest easy in the excuse that “we are just following orders.” “God alone is our conscience” means that no law, no doctrine, no rule of faith or government excuses us from the ultimate responsibility of listening to God as our only guide for decisions and actions. This is *immense* freedom, and when understood, is desired by few.

Paul knew that we are always in danger of surrendering our freedom. Much of the time we don’t know what to do with it. Frankly, it is a pain. Why not have simple rules to follow? Why not let someone else make decisions for us? Surely whoever is in charge knows what they are doing. And this requires so much less energy and leaves so much more time for leisure. But Paul warns us, that in our freedom, “*Do not allow yourselves to become slaves again!*”

Here is the problem: most of us want both freedom and security, but here is a dilemma: ***perfect freedom and perfect security are mutually exclusive.***

This may seem like a drastic statement on the surface, but consider what perfect freedom would be, at least from the standpoint of government. Perfect freedom would have no rules or laws, because rules and laws are made to restrict us. But this kind of freedom from rules and government has a name: we call it *anarchy*. I, for one, do not want that much freedom.

I also want security. But how much is too much? Perfect security would mean that I would be completely safe from harm. I would have all my needs provided for, it would be impossible for me to make a decision that would harm me or anyone else, and I would be living in such a way that no enemy could ever touch me. We have a name for this situation, too. It’s called *solitary confinement* in a maximum security prison! Often, when fear takes over, we opt for security over freedom. Paul warns us – do not give up the freedom which we have in Christ!

Martin Luther was quoted as saying, when asked how Christians are to relate to the law: “*Love God and do as you please.*” But he also said, “*A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.*”

¹ I. God alone is Lord of the conscience, and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, in anything, contrary to His Word; or beside it, if matters of faith, or worship. So that, to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commands, out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience: and the requiring of an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

So this is the nature of Christian freedom; that in loving God—which means first accepting God’s love for us—we become “empowered” by that love; not only in our actions, but even in the *motivation* for our actions. And so, it turns out that in loving God, “*what we please*” becomes what we believe pleases God.

So here you are, the congregation I have come to love so much and yet the one I must now leave, in a place of great freedom. You are free to choose simplicity and safety; you are free to choose the more frightening road of religious and civic responsibility. In your next pastor you are free to choose a leader who will preserve your most beloved traditions and customs; and you are free to choose a leader who will challenge you to move into risky, uncharted places of ministry. You are like the acrobat who, having let go of the hands of her fellow trapeze artist, is suspended in mid-air, trusting that she will be caught and carried safely home. It is a frightening moment; a joy-filled moment; a breath-taking moment.

God be with you in this rare and precious time, with God as your guide and the Spirit as the wind beneath your wings.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.