

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

Paul wrote to the church in Galatia in the early days of the Christian community. There wasn't a lot of structure to the church in these days. There weren't any fancy buildings or lots of rules. There weren't schools set up to teach the faith or even an agreed upon collection of scriptures (other than the Jewish Testament). It was simply a group of believers trying to figure out how to follow the path of Jesus. They were hearing the stories of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and they were hoping to understand what it meant for their life.

To one of those struggling, forming, hope-filled communities, Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Stand firm, Paul encourages them, but that doesn't mean they are going to be standing on their own against all that is working against them. They "stand" in what God has given them. They "stand" in the love and freedom of Christ because that is what following Jesus means.

To a marginalized, oppressed, occupied community, Paul writes to tell them that they are free in Christ. These were people who were splintering from the Jewish community in a time and place where the Jewish nation had been conquered by Roman power. These were people who had virtually no power or standing in their civic life, but they had come together as people of God to understand freedom differently.

Freedom for them meant that they were no longer ultimately subject to the power of Rome. Instead, they belonged to Christ, they belonged to God. They were no longer slaves, they were free in Christ.

So what does it mean to be "free in Christ?" How does that impact our life and what we do with it?

We have a complicated relationship with freedom in this country. There are a lot of people who interpret freedom to mean no one can tell them what to do. "Leave me alone. I am free of restriction. My personal freedom matters more than anything."

It shouldn't be controversial to suggest that maybe freedom is not license to do whatever you want. Freedom doesn't mean there are no rules. Freedom in Christ means **not** being weighed down by sin and death. Freedom in Christ means not having to worry about God's ultimate judgment **so that** you have the energy and freedom to take care of the people you encounter in this life. Freedom is about a **collective** reality.

In 1520, Martin Luther was writing and preaching in the newly forming Protestant community. You can draw parallels between what Luther was doing in the 1500s and what Paul was doing in the first days of the church. Much like that early community in Galatia that Paul wrote a letter to, Luther was writing to his friends and enemies trying to help them interpret what God was doing in Europe in that time and place. One of those important writings was a pamphlet titled, “The Freedom of a Christian” in which Luther wrote, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all¹”

It's a contradiction. Luther's great contribution to the concept of freedom was to say that those who follow Christ are perfectly free and perfectly dutiful – **at the same time.**

There's beauty in the conflict – there's power in the paradox. To put it simply, we are **not** free to do whatever we want. Community cannot survive with that kind of freedom. We are free so that we can serve one another, care for one another, strengthen one another. The way we work together as a collective of individuals will either create freedom for a community or it will create conflict.

Luther was echoing what Paul had said to that early church, “do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another.” Luther and Paul understood that we build one another up because that's what God has asked us to do. That's what freedom means.

So that's all there is too it...live as free people of God and life will be easy.

I don't suppose it's ever really that easy. Voices that raise the standard of an individualistic freedom have overwhelmed the voices that call for the good of every person. We argue about who “deserves” freedom and deny the simplest freedom of personhood with the stroke of a pen. We point fingers at those people who are “threatening” our freedom by their very existence, drop bombs on some of them, ignore some, and actively harm others.

The freedom that Christ brought into the world was soundly rejected. The world stuck to what made it feel powerful instead of trusting what Jesus was offering. The world didn't want to see something new.

And the world keeps fighting against it.

¹ Martin Luther, [*Luther's Works, Vol. 31: Career of the Reformer I*](#), ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 344.

“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,” Jesus said to those who would follow. We can’t live into the freedom of Christ if we refuse to give up the power of this world. We don’t forget or ignore everything that has come before; I think there’s a bit of hyperbole in Jesus’ responses to those who asked to follow him. But Jesus makes it very clear that the path into the Kingdom is a path forward.

Following Jesus means reorienting yourself into the freedom of the Kingdom instead of living by the world’s standard. Following Jesus means allowing yourself to be changed by God’s freedom for the sake of the world. Following Jesus means trusting in the love of God instead of the evil of this world.

Paul and Luther gave us a very specific understanding of freedom that built on the idea that God’s Kingdom is this beautifully interconnected web of grace-filled hope and peace. As we head into the celebration of our country’s independence, conflict and anger have become the throughline of our collective experience. I’m struggling to hold onto hope that we have a way to fix it. I’m struggling with defeatism. On those days, I try to hold on to the words of Jesus and words of Paul. “Stand firm,” Paul writes. “Follow me,” Jesus says. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like enough. But it’s built on freedom in Christ. It’s the truth of God’s Kingdom. It’s a promise of hope and peace. Someday. Amen