

# SERMON: On Christian Freedom (Gal 5.1, 13-21; Ex 6.1-9)

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.*

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery ... *but* through love become slaves to one another.”  
(Gal. 5.1, 13c)

In our reading from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Christian community in Galatia, Paul seems almost to contradict himself. At once we are told that the freedom Christ brings releases us from a kind of slavery. And yet, this hard won freedom should rightly lead us to a form of slavery. We are at once called out of slavery only then to be called back into it.

What then is the meaning of the freedom which Christ gives us?

The question of how we might think theologically about freedom is, currently, not a mere abstract curiosity. We are living in an era of pandemic, which has brought with it a range of restrictions on our lives. Whether we mean the restrictions implied by the risk of disease or death from covid-19; the various public health orders which have been put in place in response to this virus; or whether we are considering the role of vaccines and vaccine mandates as public health restrictions ease. We are living in a period in which the question of freedom confronts us everyday.

It is not my intention here, nor would it be my place, to offer any concrete answers to the many good questions our current experience is calling on us

to answer. Instead I want simply to offer a witness to the freedom we have heard proclaimed in our readings for today.

It is important to bear in mind that the letter to the Galatians was written to a community filled with tension, on the brink of fracturing. This young community had grown out of the Jewish renewal movement which became Christianity. As this new community grew it began to expand, including more and more non-Jews — that is, Gentiles. However, not everyone in the Galatian community agreed on what this Gentile inclusion meant.

At one level Paul suggests that the expanding barriers of this community should be expected. In words adapted from the foundational theological statement of the Uniting Church, the *Basis of Union*:

In Jesus Christ God definitively intervenes within history “to reassert God’s reach and reign within all of creation, to release those in the grip of sin, to make in Jesus a representative beginning of a new order of righteousness and love.” (*Basis of Union*, para. 3)

While there was not a singular Jewish expectation about what God’s definitive intervention within history would look like, many Jewish visions of God’s vindicating work were expansive and generous. Jewish hope included that God’s definitive act of redemption would flow out into the whole world, embracing Jew and Gentile alike.

In this sense, as bearers of the Good News that God’s vindication of God’s people has in fact come in Jesus Christ, it is not a complete surprise that the community formed in response to this Good News should expand beyond the boundaries of the Jewish community. By invoking the freedom which Christ has won for us the Apostle Paul is recalling his audience to the deep and overflowing love of God which comes out of his tradition, and

which is for all people. The boundaries of this community should be as expansive and generous as God's love, not bound simply to those who understand themselves as people of Torah (that is, the Jewish law). God's redemptive work, in which God's reach and reign breaks into the world, opens up a renewed way for God's people to belong to God, and for God to be with God's people — which is to say all people.

There is an echo here of the deep story which shapes Jesus' own Jewish tradition. Like the Israelites under bondage in Egypt, God meets us in our captivity to sin in order that God can be our God, and we can be God's people. The expanding boundaries of Christian communities extends the trajectory of liberation and freedom which the story of the Exodus establishes.

In our reading from Exodus 6 Moses conveys this message from God:

“I am the Lord, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. ... I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.” (Ex. 6.6a, 7a.)

And yet, even hearing this word of grace and liberation — this word of freedom in the midst of bondage — the Israelites could not heed this call. We are told, “because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.” (Ex. 6.9b)

To understand the freedom which Christ offers us — which continues the work of liberation at the heart of Judaism — requires understanding how deep our bondage truly goes. The forces which bind humanity: the forces of sin and death permeate all of creation and they infect our souls.

It is easy to sit with some discomfort here at the talk of cosmic forces of “sin” and “death.” This seems so foreign to our modern way of making sense

of the world. And yet, the forces of hatred and sorrow, cruelty, injustice and violence seem to flow through and infect so much of what is around us. From the moment we took our first breath many of us already found ourselves in lands that have been colonised and stolen: scarred by the past. Many of us inherited cycles of trauma, violence, addiction, and family breakdown. As we grow and develop we are shaped by cultures marred by discrimination, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. We must dig deeper when we talk about sin: going beneath our common talk of individual moral failings, and to the real ground of a world where hurt people hurt people, wounded people wound people. A world in which we are subject, captive to the world's brokenness.

The forces of sin and death which hold us in their grip are pervasive: even shaping who we are. It should not surprise us that human beings, creatures enmeshed within creation, should have the hurts and failings of the world transcribed or imprinted within us — what Paul calls “the desires of the flesh.” Like the Israelites we can struggle to see the freedom which seeks to disrupt this world. We can fail to grasp that the dis-ease of this world is met with the healing balm of God's love: mercy and justice, peace and joy.

It is for this reason that when Paul talks about freedom he cannot simply talk about one sort of freedom, but must talk about two.

The freedom which frees us *from* the yoke of our captivity. Captivity to a world that treats human life, and the life of the world itself, as something to be consumed and disregarded. Freedom from the captivity to a world which divides and oppresses people. The freedom which drives out the demons which possess us.

And then the freedom which frees us *to* a renewed life, in which we are filled by the Spirit. Having been brought out of our captivity, the freedom which we

find in the promised land of a reconciled world, where we are reconnected to the fullness of life and love which God offers the world. The freedom in which we are not simply free, but are free to be God's people together.

Our place within history is not, of course, as easy as simple proclamations make it seem. While we experience the freedom which Christ brings in fragile, fleeting, and partial ways, we are all still enmeshed in a world in which many of us experience heartbreak and tragedy.

We are caught between the times: with Christ's definitive work of salvation as the foundation of our past; and with the hope which this work secures still stretched out into our future.

While we proclaim the project of liberation and love which Jesus enacts through the work of the cross: dying in solidarity with and among those cast out by the powerful — this project of renewal gathering and intensifying the story of liberation from slavery at the foundation of Jesus' own Jewish tradition, extending it to the whole of creation. While we proclaim that love: mercy and justice, peace and joy, stands against the hatred and bigotry of the world.

We acknowledge that the reach and reign of God is still working its way through history in fragile, fleeting, and partial ways. We acknowledge that within us our own freedom is made impossible by the desires of the flesh which seek our own benefit, our own concern, our self-interest. We fail to live into the freedom to be God's reconciled people, God's people of love in service to the world. *I am only free if we are free.*

And yet we do not lose hope. Hear this word of grace:

For freedom Christ has set us free ... and so through love become slaves to the project of liberation and love which this freedom is. Become slaves to the work of redemption, which gathers all people to be God's people: to be people who proclaim love, and joy, and peace, and patience, and kindness, generosity and faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Be slaves to one another, and build the world that stands against all oppression and hatred: sin and death. For in this we are truly free together.

*Amen.*