

“For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free”

Galatians 5:1

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In the Gospels, we read that Christ came into the world that we might have life and have it with abundance. In the Letters of Paul, we read that Christ came to release us from any kind of slavery that robs us of the fullness of our humanity. Christ came to shatter whatever chains or addictions or prejudices hold us back from the freedom God intends for all people everywhere. For the Apostle Paul, Christ is the great Liberator!

Christ liberates both the oppressed and the oppressor. For true peace can not come until all are free: the one who is bullied, but also the one who feels a need to bully.

Paul is quick to use himself as an example. He reflects on his own life and he sees that he had been the one who had made life intolerable for his neighbors! He had been the one who had sought arrest warrants for religious dissidents and had them tossed into prison. He sees himself as having been the oppressor, as the very one Christ came to liberate. Having been set free from this life-choking role, he feels an obligation to use the balance of his life for freedom's sake.

So, this sermon will explore briefly what freedom means for people of faith.

First, I believe freedom, in a spiritual sense, has to do with making choices. We can choose to forgive the people who have wronged us, or we can choose not to. I know that when I choose to forgive someone who has wounded me, I experience a huge relief. It feels like an Easter Day!

Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he said to Nicodemus, ‘You must be born anew.’ I’ve come to think of the well-known confrontation with Nicodemus as Jesus’ invitation for this man of authority to taste the sweetness of the freedom that comes with forgiving someone from the heart.

For me, forgiving someone is like a millstone lifted from my neck. And when I choose to withhold forgiveness, I don’t sleep well; I don’t stay focused; I become harder to love. Everyday, God places before us the opportunity to forgive or to withhold forgiveness. One choice leads to freedom; one choice leads somewhere else.

Second, I believe freedom, in a spiritual sense, has to do with responding or not responding to an invitation to servant leadership. At the Last Supper, Jesus washes everyone’s feet and then points out to them that he has not come to be served, but to serve. Then, he invites them to follow his lead, to live their lives as servants in the service of humankind.

This is one of the great paradoxes of the Christian Faith. To be truly free, we are to choose the role of the servant. The ecclesiastical stole becomes a servant’s towel. The master’s degree from the Harvard School of Business becomes the credential for helping former drug dealers start legitimate businesses. The tall, white chef’s hat earned at the Johnson and Wales School for Culinary Arts becomes the attire for serving a meal at South Park Inn. And a shiny red Toyota pick-up becomes a vehicle for hauling sweet corn to the Open Hearth.

This paradox of faith is not explained in any encyclopedia or Wikipedia or dictionary. It can’t be Googled. It can only be grasped by giving servant leadership a try. There is an indescribable freedom that comes when authority OVER someone is traded in for authority to be in service WITH someone.

A hymn that has made its way onto my top five list is #539 in the New Century Hymnal. Its first line sings, “Won’t you let me be your servant, let me be as Christ to you. Pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.” If it’s freedom you desire, choose the path of servant leadership.

Third, I believe freedom, in a spiritual sense, comes when we confront our own mortality and face our own fear of dying. I have sat in many a classroom and learned from many a revered professor, but the people who have taught me best are the ones who have shown me how to face death with a minimum of fear. These have been people of faith. These have often been people who died too young. These have been people who have loved deeply.

My sister, Debbie, was one of my best teachers. She finished the fourth grade. But she had a PhD in freedom. When her son, Ricky, died at age 32; we had the funeral and then we drove to the Pine Hill Cemetery on Western Avenue in Westfield for the burial. Our family home of 50 years was six houses up from this cemetery. So, as we entered through the gates, a flood of childhood memories came to me. We had cut through the cemetery many times on our way to the tennis courts. We’d read the names on the tombstones and sometimes we’d read the engraved quotations or pause to wonder what had happened to someone who died in the same year as their birth.

As we approached Ricky’s grave, I heard my sister say, and this is a quote, “I used to be afraid of this place. I’m not anymore. My son will be here, and one day I will, too.” Without knowing it, she was teaching me about freedom, the freedom that comes with letting go of that ultimate fear. Hardly a day goes by that I don’t thank my sister for her wisdom. When she died three weeks after her son, we laid her body next to his. Each spring I plant geraniums by their stone.

And I thank her for teaching me about the freedom that truly matters, the freedom that allows me to live each day with abundance.

On this Memorial Day weekend, we're all pondering the cost of freedom, the blessing of freedom, the many freedoms that are ours. I hope this short reflection on freedom from a spiritual perspective allows you to live in the greatest of hope. Amen.