

“...now that faith has come”

Psalm 130 and Galatians 3:23-28

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Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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²³ Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴ Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

This is the time of year when preachers in the U.S., which is where I am from, are expected to say something about freedom.

In the days leading up to the Fourth of July, there is always a strong expectation that preachers will say something about freedom, and how good it is to live in a free land, and how blessed (and privileged) we are because of our freedom, and so on.

There was a Baptist church in the city where I moved from most recently which had a very large Fourth of July celebration in worship each year. Members of my church would become Baptists for a day, so that they could participate in this service.

I never went, of course, because I had my own service to lead, but from what I have been told Fourth of July worship at that Baptist church is quite impressive. A brass band plays every year, an enormous American flag – the size of a football field – is unfurled from the ceiling, and it’s quite a celebration of freedom. And people find it inspiring, and they look forward to it each year.

But with all that is happening in the world, maybe it’s time for us to think again about freedom and what it means.

The mood among voters, as you know, is sour.

People are not happy with their leadership and with the state of the economy and with lots of things. People are fed up, and this true on both sides of the Atlantic. People are in a mood to vote no on a lot of things, sometimes just because it feels good to vote no.

You should know that when I chose our New Testament reading for today, I did not have the Brexit vote in the U.K. on my mind. I chose it because this chapter from Galatians is a famous chapter. Galatians 3:28 is a famous verse, and if you haven't committed it to memory, you should consider doing that.

I chose this reading because it's interesting and important to revisit these important chapters in the Bible from time to time.

But then, as I sat at my desk last week and prepared for today, I began to see something that I had not expected to see. Sometimes it's scary when this happens. What you heard in the verses I read – and really, much of Paul's Letter to the Galatians could be described in this way – what you heard was Paul's reflection on freedom.

You might not know this, but Paul reflected a great deal on freedom – what it means, where it comes from, what it looks like, what it feels like. For Paul his whole life could be described as having been set free from the tyranny of the law. He mentions this over and over again.

So, what he's writing about here, I think, is worth a closer look. This could not be more timely.

What does it really mean to be free?

Before I plunge into what the Bible has to say about freedom, I should remind you that freedom is on the minds of lots of people today, not only in Britain or the United States.

In 2011 something that came to be known as the "Arab Spring" started in Tunisia and spread across North Africa. For a while it looked as though the people were overthrowing heavy-handed dictators and were going to work toward a more open future. How exciting. People in the West assumed that all you have to do is get rid of dictators and then freedom will somehow break out.

And nowhere has that assumption proved to be more faulty than in Syria, where the rebels, as you know, have turned out to be far more oppressive and far more scary than the regime they were seeking to overthrow.

Some of us are not all that interested in global politics. Some of us pay more attention to science than to politics, and I think I understand why. I'm tempted to start doing that myself – but even in science the issue of freedom is in the news. In a variety of fields, especially those where the brain is studied, scientists are finding it harder and harder to believe that there is such a thing as free will.

The cover story in the *Atlantic Monthly* magazine for this month is titled, and to me this is shocking, **"There is no such thing as free will."**

That statement would come as a big surprise to lots of theologians over the centuries.

If you want to know what the Bible has to say about freedom, the best place to start, of course, is with the Book of Exodus.

Passover is, at the deepest and most profound level, a freedom festival. And there is none greater. That feast, as you know, recalls the time God went down to Egypt and rescued his people from slavery, and over the years Jewish people have remembered and savored this moment. And in many ways Passover is the defining event in Jewish history.

It should be no surprise to anyone that when Jesus brought his ministry to a conclusion, he chose Passover-time, freedom-week, the moment when all Israel was celebrating what God had done and at the same time was praying for what God *would* do.

So, the message of Easter is that God had finally accomplished what he promised. The victory had been won.

Our freedom is secure...because of Christ's victory over sin and death.

What the Exodus story tells us, however, and I thank the British New Testament scholar N.T. Wright for this insight, what the Exodus story tells us is that **“you can take Israel of Egypt, but it's a lot harder to take Egypt out of Israel.”**

As soon as the people are across the Red Sea, the complaining begins.

And they complained for the next 40 years. They would gladly have traded their freedom for food and water – or so they said.

So much for the miracle of deliverance.

The Apostle Paul – who writes about this theme over and over again – describes being in Christ as the new Exodus. In his Letter to the Romans, chapter 8, speaking of famous chapters of the Bible and verses worth committing to memory, in Romans, chapter 8, Paul writes, **“You didn't receive a spirit of slavery. Freedom doesn't mean going back to Egypt – in other words, to slide back into fear. You,”** he writes, **“have received the spirit of sonship.”**

And what he means by that is, **“Stop thinking like a slave and start thinking like a son or a daughter of God.”**

That's his message.

I can't resist this other reference to freedom. As I said, this theme is everywhere in Paul's writings. Let's look this time at Paul's Letter to the Corinthians.

No early Christians embraced the idea of freedom as eagerly as the people in Corinth. They found freedom to be intoxicating, sometimes literally. Their slogan was: **“All things are lawful for me!”** If they had printed church bulletins each week, their mission statement printed on the front cover would have been: **All things are lawful for us! Join us!**

Or, as our younger daughter used to say to her older sister, **“You're not the boss of me.”**

And Paul wrote back, having heard some troubling stories about what was happening in Corinth, and in surprisingly patient language, though still quite forceful, he wrote. **“Yes, maybe, but not all things are helpful. Not everything you do makes you a mature follower of Jesus Christ.”**

So, there you have it. This topic of freedom turns out to be more complicated than we sometimes think. Being rescued from slavery in Egypt – or wherever you have been rescued from, we all have our own rescue stories – being rescued turns out to be just the beginning. We have been rescued, yes, thanks be to God for that, it was wonderful, but now what?

What do we do with this gift, this precious gift of freedom, that has been entrusted to us?

I can't resist telling this story. I served a church for a time in my home state of Michigan, and the church was next to a major university campus, more than 30,000 students, most of them between the ages of 18 and 21. What could go wrong?

In the U.S., unlike Switzerland, most university students leave home and live on the campus or somewhere close to it. And not surprisingly, leaving home for the first time, not quite an adult, physically maybe, but not always in other ways, and then landing in a community of 30,000 or so people of the same age has some interesting consequences.

My church at the time had an active campus ministry – a Christian outreach to students. And our campus minister, one of the best, used to tell some very interesting stories.

One was that most students who had been raised in the church, who had gone to Sunday school and youth group, who had stood in front of their congregations to be confirmed, became unchurched on their first day on campus. In a few seconds, he said, all of their parents' careful training evaporated and was gone. They had found freedom...from the tyranny of their parents, I suppose.

He also said, and this had quite an impact on our elders and members, as we thought about campus ministry, that with alcohol and drugs and sex available in almost unlimited quantities, the message of Jesus was often a difficult one to communicate. Not impossible, but very, very difficult.

When I was pastor of that church, I would park my car in a nearby parking structure and then walk a few hundred meters to the church door, and I was surprised every Sunday morning by what I had to step over to find my way to the church door. If you think the debris left at Stadelhofen on Saturday night is bad, you should have seen this. It left a permanent impression on my mind.

Tell me, what does freedom mean? What does it mean to you?

In other places in this same letter, Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he begs them not to use their freedom as **“an opportunity for the flesh.”** That's how he puts it. Instead, he begs them to be *slaves* to one another in love.

The question of course is, **“What in the world does that mean?”** Do you know? What does it mean to be slaves to one another?

It's interesting – isn't it – that Paul would choose to use the word "slave" here – in a discussion about freedom?

And yet, he does. And he chooses the word deliberately.

This is the paradox of freedom. All freedoms generate new forms of slavery. If you use your freedom to dive headfirst into the life of ... I don't know, let's say the life of a 21st century American university student, then be prepared to be enslaved to those things.

That's one choice. And I won't deny that lots of people choose it. And I won't deny that lots of people think about choosing it. They think about choosing it when their own lives seem boring and repetitive, when everyone else seems to be having so much fun and experiencing so much pleasure.

My life by comparison is so boring. You would not believe how boring my life is. I hear about friends of mine having so much fun, people I have known all of my life, and I read about their adventures on Facebook, and I see the photos, they're sitting on a boat, drink in hand, little umbrellas in the drink for some reason, and they are laughing and looking at the camera, as if to say, **"Look at what we have."**

And then of course I think about my own life. And it's so sad. I feel as though my life is slipping away, and I'm getting older. I sometimes think that I would like to get in on the action.

Or maybe not.

The alternative to what our culture likes to promote as freedom – and this is important – the *biblical* alternative is love, which is the central Christian virtue. And what love means is enslaving yourself to other people, making their needs your priority, and their sorrows your concern.

"Do you want to be free?" the Bible asks.

Then, for heaven's sake, learn to love. The whole law, Jesus once said, can be summarized in one command: Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. So, if you want to experience true freedom, follow that one command. Love freely, fully, extravagantly, as extravagantly as God has loved you.

I think the reason this is so difficult for us to accept is that we have been conditioned to think of freedom as the absence of rules and laws and constraints. To be free means that no one can tell me what to do.

"I am the boss of me."

So, when I say that freedom in Christ, or Christian freedom, means following the rule of love, it hits our ear wrong. We don't like the sound of it. And yet, it's true. It's a paradox, I'll grant you that, but it's true. The only way to be free is to enslave yourself to other people.

I have enslaved myself to the person I am married to – 39 years this month. I have enslaved myself to the two children who are the result of that marriage. And now to their husbands as well. I am enslaved to a two and a half year old girl, who knows me mostly as a wrinkled face on an iPad. She calls me "Papa," which in English means scary and old. These are the people I have decided to be enslaved to. I did it freely and joyfully. I would gladly give my own life in exchange for any one of theirs.

Is this slavery? Yes, it is. Is it difficult? Sometimes. The honest answer is that some days are better than others. But I have chosen it. And I am committed to it. I have decided to follow the rule of love.

Christ has set me free for this life.

Think of it this way, Paul writes. When you were young, your “disciplinarian” (that’s how the word is translated into English), your “disciplinarian” told you what to do – when to get up, when to go to bed, what to eat, what to wear.

And now you are free from that “disciplinarian.”

But here’s the thing. You learned well. You learned some good habits. You have internalized what the “disciplinarian” told you. Some days, you even say to yourself, **“I think that I’ve turned into my father – or my mother, or whoever raised you. I hear their words coming out of my mouth.”**

And I would say, that’s mostly a good thing. When we are at our best, we have internalized the rules and the laws that help us to live our lives productively and authentically.

So, here’s the thing: if you have internalized the law of Christ, then you know how to act in any situation. No one has to tell you. The church doesn’t have to. The pastor doesn’t have to. You already know...because the law of love lives within you.

You are free ... to love others.

You are free ... to enslave yourself to them.

I think the world we live in desperately needs to be reminded of the way freedom works ... if it really wants to be free.