



Freedom From, Freedom For – Touchpoint for June 22, 2022

Galatians 5 (NRSVUE) ¹ For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

TOUCH POINT

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become enslaved to one another.

¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another

¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Grace and peace from the Mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

From the original Greek:

“For freedom, us, Christ has freed.”

I’m going to try to talk about something today that is way out of my league. It should probably be left to greater theologians and philosophers than myself, but when has the possibility of saying something stupid ever stopped me before? And perhaps this touchpoint might get you thinking about your own life and understanding of what freedom means, especially from a Christian point of view.

And so I want to attempt today to draw a contrast between a Christian understanding of ‘Freedom’ and our present cultural understanding of it.

We talk a lot about freedom in this country. Ask people what they are most proud of about this place, what they like most about it, and you will most likely hear the word ‘freedom.’

Freedom is what we love.

So it seems odd that Paul would issue a warning, “Do not submit again to the yoke of slavery.” And “Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.”

Paul exhorts the Galatians not to use their freedom as an “opportunity for self-indulgence,” or more literally, as a “base of operations for the flesh.”

Flesh, for Paul, is not merely the physical body, but the whole self under the power of its **self-serving** desires and motives. This self is never satisfied, it seems... it never has enough esteem, status, wealth, pleasure, or whatever else it is seeking. Self-indulgence easily becomes a new form of slavery.

This, according to Paul, is the kind of freedom that leads to a new kind of bondage that is unhealthy. And I think his words have great import for our time.

You see, in our culture – at least as far as I am hearing and seeing it – freedom means I get to do whatever I want, whenever I want, and wherever I want. It is ‘freedom from’ all restraints, impositions, and responsibilities.

Which is really odd. Because for most of human history, ‘human freedom’ has been defined as the ability to rise above our lower impulses, drives, and animal instincts. It’s what separated us from the animals. It was a freedom from our base desires. It was a freedom, to use modern psychological language, from the Ego. It was a freedom from narcissism.

But that is not how it is used today in this country and culture. Today, ‘human freedom’ seems to be a freedom that encourages one to live **in** those narcissistic desires.

Now from a traditional Christian perspective, that has always been called bondage. From a traditional Christian perspective, there is a bondage ‘of the self’ and ‘to the self.’

Though trying to convince any American these days that they are in bondage to themselves or their ‘freedom’ would be an impossible task.

Even some Christians have used their Christian faith to justify more self-indulgence. I remember once hearing someone who called themselves Christian saying to me, “You know, as a Christian I just do what I want and then ask for forgiveness.”

Uhh... No, I’m sorry, but Christianity does not free you to be a jerk.

Christian freedom isn’t just a freedom from our baser instincts, it is also a freedom from our higher ‘religious’ instincts. You know, that desire to be better. The desire to show progress. The desire – to use a religious word – for ‘sanctification.’

Christian freedom is freedom from tracking your progress.

You see, sanctification, if we’re going to use that word at all, is simply the practice of getting used to grace. That’s it. Nothing more. It’s not about you being a better person than you were yesterday. That is backward looking. Just as you shouldn’t compare yourself to others, don’t compare yourself to yourself.

There is a great line in the gospel reading in this week’s common lectionary. *“No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”*

You have been freed from your past. Stop looking back at it.

Look, you are no more sanctified than when you wake up in the morning and experience a sunrise... the physical manifestation of forgiveness. You are no more sanctified than when you ‘wash your face in the morning and remember your baptism,’ to use a quote from Luther. You are no more sanctified than when you sit down and pray or meditate to start your day, and get reminded that you are a beloved child of God.

You can’t get any more pure, holy, sanctified than that. Nothing you can do during the day can top that. And it is that grace that you live out from. That is your base of operations, your foundations... not trying to be better than you were yesterday.

Now, does this mean we never get better? No, but as someone once said, and again I'm paraphrasing, "Getting better is better than not getting better. But there is a better way to get better – and that is by not worrying about whether you're getting better."

Luther once described sin as being "curved in on one's self." And so, when we talk about being freed from our sinful self, we are speaking about the self that is both curved in on its own base desires, as well as curved in on its own religious, holy desires.

This is what Luther meant when he said something to the effect, and I'm paraphrasing again, "The Christian who is constantly checking to see how they are doing doesn't understand what it means to be a Christian."

And so, I go back to what I have often said before, "We don't have a free will. We have a FREED will."

Freed from the total self, we are free to serve the neighbor, to "become slaves to one another" through love. To serve "through love" means that serving is done not to meet the demands of the law or even to feel good about ourselves. It is completely focused on the needs of the neighbor.

In the word order of the Greek text you would hear this: "*For freedom, us, Christ has freed.*"

In other words, you have been chosen for freedom. Freedom doesn't live in you. You live in freedom. Freedom is not your possession, your right. Freedom is bigger than you. You live under it and in it. And you and I have certain responsibilities within it. And so, to be chosen by God for freedom is to be chosen into a freedom that mirrors God's own – a freedom dedicated to serving others in love.

Christian freedom doesn't serve us; we serve Christian freedom.

And it is a freedom that **frees us from** trying to save ourselves, and moves us into a **freedom for** others.

If the only reason I love you is to prove I am a worthy person, or to save myself, I'm not really loving you. You are simply a stepping stone on my way to saving my celestial fanny.

I can only truly love others when I have forgotten about myself. When I have stopped trying to prove myself, justify myself, save myself.

And you can't turn loving others into a new law. It is the fruit of what happens when you hear of your unconditional acceptance by the Mystery.

It is descriptive of who you become. Not prescriptive. That is why Paul calls them the fruits of the Spirit. It is what happens after. Not before.

You don't walk through an orchard of trees and say, "You're going to be an orange tree. You, an apple tree. You, a pear tree. And you, the partridge in the pear tree."

No, you don't prescribe fruits. You describe them. So also, you know you are fully experiencing the kingdom when you see these fruits in yourself and the lives of others.

And yes, I know Paul lists a bunch of 'works of the flesh.' But again, he is being descriptive. If he is being prescriptive, NO ONE IS GETTING IN ... NO ONE! So stop the nonsense that this is prescriptive. Let the Divine Mystery decide who is in and who is out. "*For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Stop making this passage into a new law.

"If you are led by the Spirit you are not subject to the law."

“For freedom Christ has set you free.”

Freedom FROM:

From trying to save yourself. Justify yourself. Include yourself.

You are saved. You are justified for existing. You are included in God’s beloved creation. You belong. You have value. I don’t care how you want to language it. At the core and essence of your being, you are loved and cared for by the Creator of all.

Freedom FOR:

Freedom to live for others. Not because you aren’t valuable, but because your value is no longer in question.

It is the Mystery’s freedom of grace in which you live and move and have your being. And you will never be outside of that.

Amen.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Spirit of the Living God

(Celtic Spirits)

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mold me, fill me

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Life of Christ Renew Me

(Margaret Rizza)

Life of Christ renew me, Way of Christ direct me,
Truth of Christ restore me, Peace of Christ surround me. *repeat*

Word of Christ instruct me, Prayer of Christ enrich me,
Work of Christ inspire me, Light of Christ shine through me. *repeat*

Cross of Christ redeem me, Pain of Christ be in me.
Bread of Christ sustain me, Fire of Christ enflame me. *repeat*

Breath of Christ flow in me, Strength of Christ support me,
Joy of Christ uplift me, Love of Christ transform me. *repeat*

Peace of Christ surround me, Light of Christ shine through me,
Fire of Christ enflame me, Love of Christ transform me.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

My Peace

(Keith Duke)

Peace to know, Peace to live,
Peace to show, and a peace to give.
It's a peace to share and a peace that cares.
My peace I give unto you. My peace.