

“Freedom!” – Stephanie Wing, 6.27.10

Looking at the title of my sermon, you might think I'm preaching this a week early. Next week we celebrate the 4th of July - Independence Day, a day on which we celebrate freedom. But our passage today directs us to think about freedom, so here we are. A few weeks ago I talked about the argument being addressed by Paul in this letter to the Galatians. Other teachers were coming behind Paul and telling the Galatians that they must be circumcised to be true followers of Jesus. Paul responds that the gospel message is one of freedom. Old rules no longer apply. Old bonds have been broken. We are freed!

In some ways, this message changes quite a bit depending on the audience. For those who are truly oppressed, this message can be life itself. I doubt that any of us can begin to imagine what actual slavery might be like, or what it would be like to spend months or years of your life behind bars. Slavery of various kinds still exists. There are still many in captivity - in jail or prison, or prisoners of war, for example. But even these modern-day examples of slavery or bondage are still often quite far removed from our own experience.

Perhaps a more common experience is bondage to addiction. There are many who suffer addictions of all kinds - addictions to drugs, alcohol, gambling, shopping, eating, and more. Sometimes in kicking one addiction, another is picked up. The person who gives up smoking might turn to food to fill the void. I'd bet

that more of us have been touched by addictions in our lives – either personally, or through friends or family members..

While there were slaves, and prisoners, and addicts in Paul’s day, most of what Paul says has little to do with those forms of bondage. Rather, Paul points to the fact that we all have a tendency to bind ourselves to one thing or another. Though we have been set free by Christ, we continue to pursue the way of bondage to other ideals or powers in our lives.

What enslaves us today? Of what are we most afraid? What are the things that we work hardest to preserve? What are the stresses that keep us up at night? What are the things that consume us? In recent years, nearly everyone has experienced anxiety related to financial security or job loss. As foreclosures have gone through the roof, so many across the country were reminded that the homes they thought they owned ended up owning them. The things that we consume so often end up consuming us.

Looking at our Gospel reading from this morning, Jesus has some harsh words for those who would follow him. To the one who says, “ I will follow you wherever you go,” Jesus responds, “Prepare to be homeless!” Jesus doesn’t grant the request for another follower to go bury his father before following him. And the one who asks permission to first go back and bid farewell to his loved ones is stung by the response: “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit

for the kingdom of God.” Ouch. We can try to soften Jesus’ words here, but the message here, repeated elsewhere, is that we really need to be ready to let go of everything in order to follow God. It’s a tall order! We have so much to lose.

I’m reminded of a story told by Bishop William Willimon of the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church. He was a featured speaker at a gathering to celebrate the opening of a new church-based program designed to help homeless men in Atlanta learn job skills and look for employment. He got up and spoke for a while about how great this program was, and after he was done, one of the homeless men at the back raised his hand and said, “Sir? Didn’t Jesus say that he had no where to lay his head?” “Well, yes he did.” “And so wouldn’t that make him homeless?” “Yes, I suppose it would.” “Well,” said this man, “I appreciate this effort, but if it’s all the same to you, I’ll stick with Jesus.” When you have nothing to lose, think of how much you have to gain!

We have been freed by Christ, but we are still enslaved by all that we have to lose. Only when we start to count all of our loss as gain can we really begin to experience freedom in Christ. We have to loosen our grip on all else that we hold important in order to fully and freely follow Jesus. We might all be surprised to find out how much we stand to gain when we do. Especially in times of recession, more people return to simple lifestyles, and are surprised to find that by letting go of the things they once held as precious, they are actually happier.

So part of our question of freedom today involves taking a look at the things and the desires to which we are enslaved, and re-orienting our focus from pursuing those desires to pursuing and being pursued by Christ. That's part of it. But true freedom in Christ also entails submission. Only when we have been set free in Jesus Christ can we fully submit to God and to each other, bound by love. When Paul talks elsewhere about our call to be bound together in unity, the word he uses is "chained." Here he says we should be slaves to one another in love. We are to re-order our desires so that they are based on the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And that leads us to the "fruits of the Spirit."

It's easy for us to read this familiar passage as moral instruction for Christians. And that's partially right. But when Paul addresses "you," it is almost always in the second person plural. He speaks to the whole community, and it is to the whole community that he addresses the issues of slavery to wrong desires and bearing the right kind of fruit. Notice that many of the "bad behaviors" and most of the fruits of the Spirit go beyond individual action. Enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy all really only happen in the context of a community. And practicing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control are all so much easier to do when you don't have to worry about loving others, being joyful with others, having peace with those who try our patience, and so on.

If we understand that the audience is the whole community of believers, in what ways is the community as a whole enslaved, despite having been freed in Christ? Paul addresses two specific ways. The first is the argument that has been the subject of this whole letter – that of circumcision, and whether the Gentile converts should be “slaves,” or adhere to, the Jewish law. Of course Paul says, “No!” The second is the degree to which the community allows behavior that is destructive rather than encouraging behavior that is up-building. Paul charges the whole community: “If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit!”

Is our community of faith today guided by the Spirit? Earlier I said that we can often identify the things to which we have a disordered relationship based on the fears that we have. So what fears do we have as a church? There is a fear that we will not grow any more, and will just have to close our doors. There is a fear that we will grow in new and different ways, and that this will no longer be the church that we all know and love. But both of those fears can control us, and keep us from moving forward, guided by the Spirit. If we let go of our fears, and remember that it is God who calls us into being and to mission in the world, we must also trust that God has a plan for our church, whatever that may be.

Andy and I have talked a lot about discerning what God is calling us to do as a church, and that is an ongoing process. But as we continue that task of discernment together, we also need to be mindful of how we are growing. We

need to pay attention to our roots. All churches want to see certain kinds of fruits – more young people and families, more individuals involved, expanding programs and other signs of robust health. But sometimes we pay so much attention to the fruits that we want to cultivate that we completely ignore the root system.

Paul’s two lists of behavior – both the good and the bad – are “fruit” lists. They are examples of what blooms and grows in a community, depending on how the roots are cared for. Looking at the “bad” list, all churches have examples of some of those problems, but some communities seem to breed enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy. At the very least, they do little to stop them. They are enslaved to desires that are stronger than the desire to follow Christ.

On the other hand, when communities encourage and nurture the kind of servant love that Paul admonishes, the fruits are much different. While each of the fruits that Paul lists are things to strive for, they are more importantly the marks of a community of believers that is truly free in Christ. When we are freed from the bonds of anger, grudges, taking sides, spreading gossip, and judging each other, then we can really orient ourselves to follow God in Jesus Christ. And when we are oriented to God, and freed from our own selfish desires, then we will produce the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control season after season.

You can't expect an oak tree to produce apples, and you can't expect a diseased apple tree to produce a good harvest. We can't just aim to produce a certain kind of fruit without planting the right seeds, and then properly tending to the cultivation of the roots. And we can't aim to produce a certain kind of church without paying attention to our own seeds, and properly tending to the cultivation of the roots that God has planted here.

Are we ready to embrace our freedom in Christ? Are we ready to become slaves to each other, and servants to the world, through the love of God? Are we ready to let go of the chains that we pick up and carry, and ready instead to chain ourselves to each other in love? Are we ready to be tended by the master gardener so that we can bear good fruit? For freedom, Christ has set us free. So let us live into that freedom, bound together by the love of God and the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.