



GALATIANS

Freedom's Conclusion | 6:11-18

Today we conclude a four-month journey in the book of Galatians. Appropriately enough, our last in-person Gathering started us in this most impactful letter, and our first in-person Gathering brings us to its conclusion. Paul's concise letter is a plea and argument to his friends and family in Jesus to live fully into the promise of life in him. Paul's appeal is to take, as Paul himself has done, take Jesus at his word, and to, "Walk with Jesus via the Spirit, working with him—watching how Jesus does it. **Learning the unforced rhythms of grace...living freely and lightly.**" (Matthew 11:28-29).

Freedom has been a front-and-center topic these last four months, and not just for our little faith family. Consistently before us, on both our screens in and our daily decisions, we have been face-to-face with the giving up of everyday freedoms for the sake of community health and confronted with the struggles we have with taking such responsibility for one another. Likewise, we have had tragically and necessarily put before us the grave reminder of our neighbors and friends plight to experience the fullness of freedom long-promised and, once again, been confronted with the struggles we have with taking such responsibility for one another. Achieving and exercising freedom marks not just our nation's history, but continues at the forefront of our nation's ills and aspirations still today.

At the same time, we can, genuinely and accurately, say that at this moment in history, collectively as a society, we have more "freedom" in our daily living than has been experienced by humanity in history. Yet, we may be more desperate and in need of true freedom than ever before. Though we live in the "land of the free" and the "home of the brave," we are no more inoculated to the forces (internally and externally) that "spy out our freedom [the fullness of our humanity] in Christ Jesus," ever acting to "bring us into slavery," than those who heard "freedom" spoken from the lips of Jesus himself. Current research and daily images suggest that we are a nation trapped like few others in history. We are entangled in debt, inhibited by fear and anxiousness, subjugated to the power of what's "trending," repressed by limitlessness, every movement monitored and adjudicated, addicted to a variety of the deplorable and the lauded, isolated through constant connection, confined to cultural identities, entombed within the recycling stream of "self-help," chained by ingrained systems that continue out of ignorance and arrogance. And, as we have been aptly reminded these last few months, we are a people who have and continue to "bite and devour one another," finding ourselves, our neighbors, our friends, and family being "consumed by one another."

Still, it is "For freedom Christ has set us free..." (5:1) Even amid all those people, ideas, and forces—religious, moral, political, economic, etc.—"secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus," (2:4) who would have us unthinkingly live by our own wits and wisdom or theirs, only to find that we have willingly "submitted again to a yoke of slavery." (5:1) It does not have to be so. Paul reminds us that grace and peace has come to us from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, because our Father desired us to be free (1:3-4). There is, as we

have discovered in Paul's letter, a way to live freely and lightly. When we walk by the Spirit and are led by the Spirit, we bear the fruit of a full and unique life in Jesus with and for others (5:22-6:5). A life produced by God's action and God's acting is what Paul calls a life of faith. Paul has used the word "faith" some twenty-two times in this little letter, each time anchoring faith in the efficacy of Jesus' death and resurrection. Freedom is not won; it is received. Freedom is not perfected through our desperate, delusional, or even genuine effort; it is the natural consequence of the gift received with faith. **Faith that God has acted and is acting, and that my place and responsibility is a response to God's act and acting.**

Even so, as our scriptures and experience demonstrate, we best not "underestimate the difficulties in living free for all, of traveling light: it is persistently hard."¹ True freedom places requirements on us and exposes us to things we are often unprepared to experience. Free and easy are not synonyms. The difficulty of living freely and lightly is why we cannot live unaccompanied. We need the testimony of those in antiquity who have striven to put on the yoke of Christ alone and who have borne on their bodies the marks of Jesus. And, we need the encouragement of a faith family joining with us in our learning the unforced rhythms of grace, sharing our burdens as we carry our loads. And yet, aspiring to travel light is a worthwhile endeavor, and perhaps one most needed in our allotted period and boundary of our dwelling place. **Freedom is essential for all to be fully human, to living rightly (wholly and complete) with God and one another.** As one author comments, "Christians, in touch with the God who grants us a freedom far richer than its political and cultural versions, are in the privileged but awesomely responsible position of pioneers of the free life...living out this Christ-freedom is a gift we can offer the world..."²

But how? How do we offer freedom to the world? How do we take appropriate responsibility for ourselves and one another amid the consistent pull to submit again to the lesser life by our terms or some others? Well, it is not through circumcision or uncircumcision, as Paul says in verse 15 of his concluding statement. Another way to say that, it is neither religious adherence nor the pursuit of happiness, neither the vision of religious separatism, moral excellence, righteous rituals nor the American dream of autonomous success, entrepreneurial advancement or conquering will. It is a wholly different way in which we live as "a new creation," as Paul calls it. A new life lived through daily dying.

I know it sounds crazy, overwhelming, loony, or just religious jargon to say that true freedom comes through the giving up of life; and yet, the unexpected, what the world would call (and we all are thinking) "unnatural" might just be precisely what is needed. If the expected and natural, "works of the flesh" as Paul referred to them in chapter 5, result not in freedom for all but the division of self, separation from those closest to us, and oppression of "others," then something else is necessary. Specifically, a dependent life on God, in-step with God, a life of faith.

We said at the first of this series that Galatians is a response to the gospel, the good news that God is here, sharing his life with us. A life lived in response to this truth is what we call a life of faith. This good news is kept within Paul's direct line of sight through the most unexpected image: the cross of Jesus Christ. And so, as we

¹ Ibid. 15.

² Ibid. 15, 12

have read today, Paul concludes his treatise on the free life where he started, with the crucifixion, Jesus dead and alive again.

Crucifixion—the gruesome and drawn out torture and execution of a human being—is a result, as one author says³,

“of malice and weakness and ambition...[Crucifixion] happens when people get their own way...[it] results from men and women—most of them decent people—living decent lives, grabbing for their piece of the pie, and shoving to keep their place in line. [Or, as Paul said in chapter 5, “if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you do are not consumed by one another.” Crucifixion is the determined necessity, the natural outcome, the end of the line of working out of our wits and wisdom. The conclusion of a system bound by control rather than free to love.]

Yet crucifixion is more than this. It is God submitting himself [to the outcomes of human decisions to live life our way]. Jesus Christ, God with us, enters this world of determinism and necessity, a world where nothing works out the way we want it or plan it or expect it. Crucifixion is God participating in the interplay of biology and economics and politics and psychology and religion [which never seem to bring the world together wholly and inevitably divides despite the best intentions. Crucifixion is God participating in the interplay], not standing aloof from it...But the submission is not dumb cowardice; it is a freely chosen strategy. ‘The only way evil every wins victories [,’ says John Robinson, ‘] is by making a man retort by evil, reflect it, pay it back, and thus afford it a new lease on life. Over one who persistently absorbs it and refuses to give it out, it is powerless. It is in this way that Paul sees Christ dealing with the forces of evil—going on and on, triumphantly absorbing their attack by untiring obedience [to the Father], till eventually there is nothing more [the forces of evil] can do.’

[Jesus’ immersion in the worst conclusion to humanity’s best effort is what] Paul proclaims and praises [at the end of his letter]. Paul does not glory [or boast and take confidence in] Jesus’ walking on water, showing himself Lord of creation. Paul does not glory [or boast and take confidence in] Jesus’ calling Lazarus from the tomb, showing himself Lord over death. Paul does not glory [or boast and take confidence in] Jesus’ teaching on the beatitudes, showing Jesus as a master truth-teller. Paul does not glory [or boast and take confidence in] Jesus’ touching the leper, showing himself [to be] the compassionate healer. [Paul] knows all those things and appreciates them. His life of faith is enriched by them. But [Paul] *glories* [takes confidence in] the crucifixion. His boast is that God in Jesus entered the stuff of our everyday existence where the lights and the shadows mingle, where our good intentions and evil impulses vie for ascendancy, where hope struggles with despair, where men [and women] try their best and give up, where all ends in ugliness and injustice, where life is not fair, where things don’t work out for the best. Paul doesn’t boast of a God glorious [radiant] in the heavens, untouched by the mess and confusion and ambiguity of history. He doesn’t assemble sonorous [impressive], multi-syllabled lists of God’s attributes and boasts that no Greek or Roman or Egyptian god has half the qualities. No, [Paul in verse 14 says,] ‘Far be it from to glory [boast or take confidence in anything] except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.’”

³ Ibid. 188-189.

God's acting within the determinism and necessity of a world in which human's get their way, is the foundation of Paul's faith, **for what God did in Jesus, He does in and for you and me.** Or, as Paul finishes his declaration, 'far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, *by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.*' (6:14)

"Paul is singing the free life [in his letter to the Galatians], celebrating the glorious liberty of the children of God [the children of promise.] How did he come to it? The way that [Jesus] came to it, via crucifixion. Paul didn't become free by adding up all the courageous moral choices he had made in defiance of the Greek culture in which he had grown up. He didn't get it by accumulating learning and virtue and wisdom in the Jewish heritage into which he was born. He didn't get it by retreating into the Arabian desert where he was free from the expectations and influences of others and free to be alone with God. He didn't do it by concentrating on the good times—the times when he preached powerfully, or had clear sailing in his missionary travels, or when the words came effortlessly and clear while he was dictating one of his famous letters. [No.] He experienced freedom when he was trapped in difficulties, caught in the contradictions and paradoxes of the faith, when he was shipwrecked, imprisoned, mocked. Paul didn't seek out the comfortable jobs, didn't hide from the opposition, didn't retreat from challenge. Everywhere he was up against indifference, malice and ignorance that he simply couldn't budge. [Just look at his letters, the issues that he writes to, the conflict, confusion, and opposition into which his encouragements and exhortations are delivered.] He was stuck in prison [for years]. He was interrupted by shipwreck [multiple times]. He was chased and beaten [again, multiple times.] [Would you describe such a man as free?] All the facts are against it. And yet no one has written more convincingly, so influentially and so autobiographically on living freely. [Why? Because Paul] locates the source of his free life in the cross "by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.' Let the world do its worst [Paul says,] and, when it has done its worst, **we are free to find out and experience what God does.** Or let the world do its best, and, when that best turns out not to be enough, **we are free for what God does.** Let me do my worst, [even] and, when I have done my worst, **I experience what God does.** Or let me do my best, and, when my best is not enough, **I am free for what God does.**

[And,] What God does is to resurrect [, bring 'a new creation,' new life]...**Christ dies and sets us free to die [and live a new]."**⁴

Dying is both the end and beginning of a life lived free and light, a life of faith. To be free to die is, as Eugene Peterson put it, "the climax of freedom."⁵ We are free, like Jesus, to lay down our lives amid the determinism and necessity of existence produced by humanity getting its own way, and, like Jesus, take up a new life in God's action and acting: a life of faith. As Jesus said in John 12:24, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit," the same fruit of the Spirit Paul described just a chapter before. Think about it,

⁴ Ibid. 189-190.

⁵ Ibid. 191.

“If I no longer have to protect and safeguard my life [both that temporal and eternal existence because God has and is acting to secure and safeguard me then], I am free to live by faith. If I no longer have to justify my life [comparing and contrasting myself with others and a ‘culture identity,’ because God says I am his child, given a yoke and inheritance fit uniquely for me because He has made it so then], I am free to live by faith. If I no longer have to dread death, fearful that all meaning terminates in my coffin [that best and most are limited to what I can grab here and now], I am free to live by faith.”⁶

“And for all who live by this rule,” Paul says in 6:16, this dedication to a life of faith in God’s acting and our place and responsibility in relationship and response to God’s acting, “peace and mercy be upon them...” When we realize we are free to die, die to those people, ideas, and forces—religious and irreligious, cultural and communal—who imprison us in sin (a way of knowing ourselves and of living other than God’s promise and presence), then we are free indeed. When “we know how to die,” Austin Farrar argues, “so die that everything we have become in our living [by our religion, by our culture, by our self-making and self-assesemnts] is handed back to God who gave us life for him to refashion [recreate] and use according to is [good and eternal] pleasure,”⁷ then we are free to really live!

Paul ends this “little bomb” of a letter with a mic drop. In verse 17, he says, “From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.” In other words, he is done talking and arguing and pleading for freedom; he is ready to get back to living the free life gifted him in Jesus—doing so grandly, intensely, joyously, and boldly. Turning to walk off stage back into the mess that is the consequences of humanity’s best and worst, Paul is taking up Jesus’ invitation to “take up your cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Paul is saying that he is putting to death a life by his wits and wisdom or even the wisdom of others, and living by faith that God is here, sharing his life with him.

Time for you and I to do the same, to follow Paul as he follows Jesus, “**Learning the unforced rhythms of grace...Keeping company with him as we learn to live freely and lightly.**” (Matt. 11:29-30). “May what our Lord Jesus Christ gives freely [life with him fully and forever], be deeply and personally yours, my friends.”

Pray with me.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Austin Farrar, quoted in Peterson, 191.

Communion

Our prayerful intention as a faith family is to help one another be in touch with God who grants us freedom beyond our cultural fantasies, and grow in the exercising of the awesome responsibilities as pioneers of a free life for the sake of our co-workers, children, friends, and neighbors. We have throughout this series, been united in this prayed expedition with these words adapted from Ernest Campbell's prayer⁸, which we pray one more time today:

We join our prayers today in intercession for the men and women in our faith family, in our daily lives, and in our city who are trapped:

those who are trapped in poverty and debt with no sign of relief;
those who are trapped in jobs and stages of life that engage but a fraction of their powers;
those who are trapped in families and relationships where love has ebbed away;
those who are trapped in illness both societal and physical;
those who are trapped in unwanted alliances out of which they cannot break;
those who are trapped in religion or the pursuit of happiness;
those who are trapped and see no other way out but by repaying evil for evil;
those who are trapped by the fear of discovery, or by dependency on others, or by the need for drugs, or by an addiction to any other distraction;
those who are trapped by sin, their own, and others.

O Father, whose will it is that we be free, and who did give Your Son that
we might be delivered from all coercive powers;
make us examples of Your freedom, proclaimers of Your freedom, and
instruments of Your freedom;
snap our chains that we may loose the chains of others,
and be free to die, and therefore free to live.

Then shall the joy of the liberated rise from the earth like a mighty hymn of praise, Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁸ Ernest T. Campbell, *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*, 50-51.