



ORBITING JESUS TOGETHER

Living Free...& Responsible

November 19, 2023

[Worship Music Playlist](#)

Prelude – Find My Joy by Ryan Delmore

Welcome/Announcements (Advent Kickoff & Resources)

CTW | Isaiah 41:17-20

When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I the Lord will answer them; I the God of Israel will not forsake them. I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys. I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water. I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive. **I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together, that they may see and know, may consider and understand together, that the hand of the Lord has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it.**

Song #1 – Found It All by Leslie Jordan

Song #2 – I am Set Free by All Sons and Daughters

Dismiss Kids

Pre-Sermon | Ephesians 4:10-16

And the One who climbed down is the One who climbed back up, up to highest heaven. He handed out gifts above and below, filled heaven with his gifts, filled earth with his gifts. He handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher to train Christ's followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ's body, the church, until we're all moving rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God's Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ. No prolonged infancies among us, please. We'll not tolerate babes in the woods, small children who are an easy mark for impostors. God wants us to grow up, to know the

whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love.

SERMON | Living Free...and Responsible

With our role in the Anchored Collective and association with the Acts 29 Network, I often meet with new-to-the-area pastors, hope-to-be-pastors, and preparing-church planters. The interchanges always involve an exchanging of histories, descriptions of where we are and hope to be, and almost always, in some form or another, this question: *What's the most surprising thing you've discovered in planting and pastoring?*

My answer, without hesitation, is the same since early into our decade-long endeavor: *Freedom in Jesus is hard, and sometimes we don't want it.*

My assumption in planting, especially in our context, was that freedom in Jesus was what people wanted, what I wanted, and that living free would be, well, freeing. Yet both the difficulty and lack of motivational force that is freedom in Christ continue to amaze me at times. It's like I am still learning a new way of being, with all the hitches and hiccups that come with growing up in the world for the first time.

And yet, it's clear to me that from our first and forming stories of scripture, from the Garden to the Promise Land, through the collective prayers and prophetic pronouncements, all the way to the lips of Jesus,

"If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn. 8:31-32)

to the appeal of the early church,

"For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1)

Living free is both our beginning and our end. And yet, as Paul's exhortation presumes, something about freedom would have people give it up. There is something about freedom that requires conviction and courage to hold to. This means freedom probably isn't autonomy, the emancipation from everything that binds and bonds, the ability to get, do, or be anything I want, *but* freedom means something else. Walking into this tension of freedom different and deeper, a freedom that requires not merely gives is our pilgrimage of faith.

Speaking of the history and tension of freedom from within the Jewish community—a history and tension we share in our faith, even, as we'll discuss later, if we wrestle with it in a different Way—Rabbi Abraham Heschel says¹,

¹ Abraham Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, 13, 15-16

“When the Voice of God spoke at Sinai, it did not begin by saying, ‘I am the Lord your God Who created heaven and earth.’ It began by saying, ‘I am the Lord your God Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.’ Judaism is not only deliverance from external slavery, but also freedom from false fears and false glories, from fashion, from intellectual will-o’-the-wisps...

The most commanding idea that Judaism dares to think is that **freedom, not necessity, is the source of all being**. *The universe was not caused, but created*. Behind mind and matter, order and relations, the freedom of God obtains. The inevitable is not eternal. All compulsion is a result of choice. A tinge of that exemption from necessity is hiding in the folds of the human spirit.

We are not taught to feel accused [that’s what the enemy does], [nor] to bear a sense of boundless guilt [that’s what the sacrificial and religious system ensures is aliveated]. We are asked to feel elated [go out in joy], bread to meet the tasks that never end [led into the becoming and making whole and complete, cypress in the desert, monuments to God’s ever-creating]...

As a free being the Jew must accept an enormous responsibility. The first thing a Jew is told is: You can’t let yourself go; get into harness, *carry the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven*. He is told to bear loads of responsibility. He is told to abhor self-complacency, to enjoy freedom of choice. He has been given life and death, good and evil [the keys of the kingdom as it were], and is urged to choose, to discriminate. Yet freedom is not only the ability to choose and to act, but also the ability to will, to love. The predominant feature of Jewish teaching throughout the ages is **a sense of constant obligation...**[which means,] **Freedom presupposes the capacity for sacrifice...**[No wonder!] **Freedom is a challenge and a burden against which man often rebels**. He is ready to abandon it, since it is full of contradiction [of reason, desire, and devotion] and continually under attack...

The meaning of freedom is not exhausted by deliberation, decision, and responsibility, although it must include all this. The meaning of freedom presupposes [as we [discussed last week](#)] an openness to transcendence [to something more than, outside of, other than ourselves], and man has to be *responsive* before he can be *responsible*...[which is why,] **There is no freedom without awe...**The shock of radical amazement, the humility born in awe and reverence, the austere discipline of unremitting inquiry and self-criticism [examination as we called it in our [Simply To Flourish](#) series] are acts of liberating man from the routine way of looking only at those features of experience which are similar and regular, and opening his soul to the unique and transcendent [to [Van Gogh & John’s Life Light](#) filling all the world]...We must cultivate many moments of silence to bring about one moment of expression. We must bear many burdens to have the strength to carry out one act of freedom.”

For Heschel, to be one caught in the lineage of our faith, is to be one who understands both the **essentialness of freedom**—freedom “to act in agreement with the spirit that goes beyond all necessities,”² responsive to the One and the Truth of reality that not merely causes but creates—as well as **the weight of freedom**—the

² Ibid., 15.

“enormous responsibility...capacity for sacrifice...degree of independence,” required of freedom in relationship, which “communion and participation in that which transcends” inherently carries.

To be free in our faith, to live full and forever, is to live in awe (open to transcendence), responsive, and responsible—with and for one another. The vision of such freedom is, at least in my experience, almost always welcomed. Still, it is in the *how*, the practicals, and the details amid the overwhelming awareness of what is lacking and the anxieties of a “multiplicity of tasks and responsibilities” that the vision of freedom and loyalty to that vision of freedom in Christ tend to weaken, even “submitting again” to a yoke not made for us. A yoke of the kingdom of heaven translated as a yoke of “religion” or “church” or “fruitfulness.”

Where we differ from our Jewish heritage is not in ontology (nature of being), cosmology (nature of the universe), or anthropology (nature of our humanity) but in doxology (the nature of our worship). We worship not in perpetual anticipation, laboring under a yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven ever wearing the restraint of a future expectation, if, when, and how we can live to bring it about. Instead, we worship and labor (liturgy meaning the work of the people) within the peace (the rest) of the Kingdom of God in our midst, that our way of life is an entry into, or not, a life with God and others for which we are made and made for us:

At that time, Jesus declared [to those whose lives orbited around the temple, whose community was their synagogue]...Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy [literally, ‘made for you,’] and my burden [weight of my load which cannot be transferred] is light [not burdensome, won’t crush].” (Matthew 11:28-30)

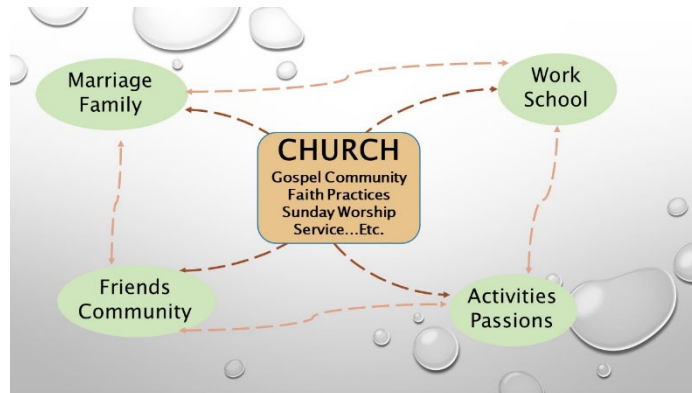
We labor under a different yoke, carrying a different weight than our Jewish ancestors. Still, the manner of living free has not changed: collective and individual faith practices equipping us to be **free in our God-gifted** responsibility with and for one another.

Over the past few weeks, we said, as Van Gogh’s painting portrays...

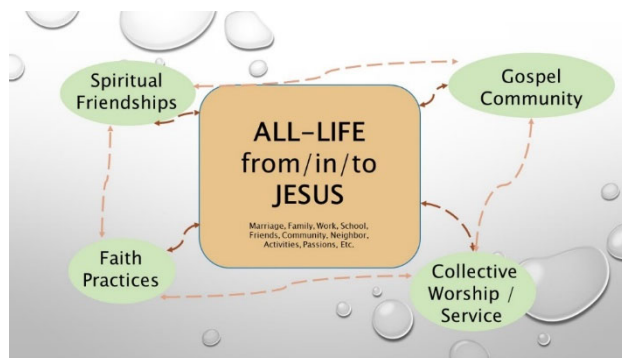


...that our God-created life together, our “cypress in the desert,” is a means to draw eyes, ears, and hearts to God alive and active all around us. That, indeed, our life together in Jesus is lived off-center from the structure of church as we typically think of it.

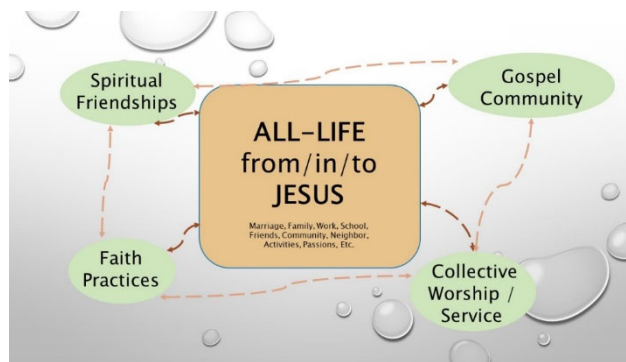
While we cannot deny the significance or escape the necessity of being a part in the body of Christ, connected, contributing, and following Jesus with others, the activities and ambitions of “church structured” don’t make a life.



What we’ve said is the testimony of our scriptures, of Jesus himself, is life is made, good, in, through, and for Jesus. All our community activities, then, are meant to cultivate the *root of faith: awe and reverence, an awareness and appreciation of the grandeur and mystery and beauty of God’s Life in the granular places of existence.*



Awe, that beckons a response so that we might be responsible in our freedom. **To Orbit Jesus Together, is to live free in faith, awe and responsive in our bound relationships and responsibilities.**



We cultivate awe and reverence, response and responsibility for life in, through, and for Jesus—as we said last week, in our ways of being together (spiritual friendships, Gatherings, Gospel communities, even service). But most aptly, by apprenticing ourselves to Jesus—being with, becoming like, and doing what He did—through our collective and individual [Faith Practices](#).



Remember what Jesus said,

“Take my yoke upon you, and *learn from me*...and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:29)

Our responsibility to God, ourselves, and one another (which is broader than “the church”), the yoke made for us, the burden of responsibility we were made to carry, resting in Jesus, is it to **“Think Little.”**

We live in a time and place where we almost instinctually look to “them” as both the cause and solution to our problems. Whether “them” be the government, corporations, media, family, school, or church. “They/them” are seen as the source of our issues, and even if we wouldn’t use this language explicitly, they too (if they’ll get it right/listen/change) will be the source of our salvation.

Contending with our American propensity to rely on organizations, institutions, programs, systems, processes, etc., to solve the issues of living, Wendell Berry³ suggests a different approach. While not denying the fundamental need for justice and compassionated systems, nor the citizen’s role in laboring for such systems,

³ Wendell Berry, “Think Little,” in *The World-Ending Fire*, 53-55.

Berry knows what our scriptures testify: that we'll stand before our Creator, the gifter of Life, and give account for, is not did the system change, but what did I do with my freedom in the system.

While Berry is primarily referencing social and ecological issues, we know (as does he) the spiritual/relational nature of both our struggles and our hopes. So, as I read, when you hear "government" or "organization," "corporations" or "bureaus," don't forget to include "Church-Centered" in all its forms (institutions, networks, denominations, agencies, celebrities, and the like) that we've culturally come to know.

"If we are to hope to correct our abuses of each other and of other races and of our land, and if our effort to correct these abuses is to be more than a political fad [recycling energy of group think] that will in the long run be only another form of abuse, then we are going to have to go far beyond public protest and political action. We are going to have to rebuild the substance and integrity of private life in this country. We are going to have to gather up the fragments of knowledge and responsibility that we have parceled out to the bureaus and the corporations and the specialists, and put those fragments back together in our own minds and in our families and households and neighborhoods. **We need better government, no doubt about it. But we also need better minds, better friendships, better marriages, better communities. We need persons and households that do not have to wait upon organizations, but can make necessary changes in themselves, on their own.**

For most of the history of this country our motto, implied or spoken, has been Think Big. A better motto, and an essential one now, is **Think Little**. That implies the necessary change of thinking and feeling, and suggests the necessary work. Thinking Big has led us to the two biggest and cheapest dodges of our time: plan-making and law-making...Somebody perceives a problem, and somebody in the government comes up with a plan or a law. The result, mostly, has been the persistence of the problem, and the enlargement and enrichment of the government.

But the discipline of thought is not generalization; it is detail, and it is personal behavior. While the government is 'studying' and finding and organizing its Big Thought, nothing is being done. But the citizen who is willing to Think Little, **and, accepting the discipline of that**, to go ahead on his own, is already solving the problem. A person who is trying to live as a neighbor to their neighbors will have a lively and practical understanding of the work of peace and kinship, and let there be no mistake about it—they are *doing* that work. A couple who make a good marriage, and raise healthy, morally competent children, are serving the world's future more directly and surely than any political leader, though they never utter a public word. A good farmer who is dealing with the problem of soil erosion on an acre of ground has a sounder grasp of that problem and *cares* more about it and is probably doing more to solve it than any bureaucrat who is talking about it in general. A person who is willing to undertake the discipline and the difficulty of mending their own ways is worth more...than a hundred who are insisting merely that the government and the industries mend *their* ways."

Isn't Berry saying what Paul says in Ephesians 4 that ___ read earlier?

grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift...And Jesus gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ**, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the

Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:8, 11-16)

Having been each gifted grace (life) by Jesus, gifted parts of the body in Jesus to help join us together in our apprenticeship to Jesus to encourage and equip us in living to the fullest (the maturation) of our faith through Jesus, Paul commending us to build ourselves up into maturity in Christ Jesus, each part working (taking up the yoke) speak truth in love (an ability of freedom) to one another precisely because Jesus has given us the gifts to do so. Not simply be built up by the organizational leadership, but equipped, helped along the way to maturing as the means of maturing, to stability. That is our responsibility. Learn from Jesus yourself: listen, abide, and be led in your personal and daily life. You've been given all the means and relationships to do so. No one can do this for you. If you want to express freedom in who you are, who God knows you to be, to live true, whole, and free, you have to learn to be responsible for yourself so that you can be appropriately responsible for one another.

Because here is the thing about Thinking Little Together—being aware of our discontent and learning contentment (self-sufficiency in Life Himself)—we are what “the church, the gathered” are meant to be...an oasis in the desert, a testimony/portrait that draws attention to God’s powerful working. Or, if you like the more energetic imagery,

“A crowd whose discontent has risen no higher than the level of slogans is only a crowd. But a crowd that understands the reasons for its discontent and knows the remedies is a vital community, and it will have to be reckoned with.”⁴

For, in the words of Jesus, to those

“faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter the joy of your master.” (Matthew 25:21)

Let’s discuss.

REFLECTION | To Consider and Discuss

- In what ways do you feel the “challenge and burden” of freedom in Jesus?
- How are/can you take responsibility...“Think Little” ...& enter the joy of your master?

⁴ Ibid., 51.

COMMUNION |

I have learned in whatever situation to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Jesus who strengthens me. (Philippians 4:11-13)

We conclude our resting to enter our living...
Through the strength of Christ's birth with His baptism,
Through the strength of His crucifixion with His burial,
Through the strength of His resurrection with His ascension,
Through the strength of His descent for the judgment of doom.

Christ with me,
Christ before me,
Christ behind me,
Christ in me,
Christ beneath me,
Christ above me,
Christ on my right,
Christ on my left,
Christ when I lie down,
Christ when I sit down,
Christ when I arise,
Christ in the heart of every person who thinks of me,
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,
Christ in every eye that sees me,
Christ in every ear that hears me.
In Through and For Jesus, we live. Amen.

SONG #3 – Nothing Holding Me Back by Bryan & Katie Torwalt

SONG #4 – Give Thank by Don Moen (Anchored Hymns)

BENEDICTION | Ephesians 4:17-25

As we conclude the day made for us, we enter into the work for which we are made [LIGHT THE CANDLE], remembering:

And so I insist—and God backs me up on this—that there be no going along with the crowd, the empty-headed, mindless crowd. They've refused for so long to deal with God that they've lost touch not only with God but with reality itself...But that's no life for you. You learned Christ! My assumption is that you have paid careful attention to him, been well instructed in the truth precisely as we have it in Jesus. Since, then, we do not have the excuse of ignorance, everything—and I do mean everything—connected with that old way of life has to go...Get rid of it! And then take on an entirely new way of life—a God-fashioned life, a life renewed from the inside and working itself into your conduct as God accurately reproduces his character in you. What this adds up to, then, is this: no more lies, no more pretense. Tell your neighbor the truth. In Christ's body we're all connected to each other, after all.