

What Will You Do with Your Freedom?

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Next weekend our nation celebrates the 4th of July, the day on which we Christians give thanks to God for the freedom we enjoy as citizens of this great land. It's right that we do so. But as Lutheran Christians, we have even more reason to give thanks to God always for the even greater freedom that we enjoy as citizens of the Kingdom of God and believers in the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. There are parallels that can be drawn between these two kinds of freedom. For example, we were born into our national freedom – it's ours by right of birth in America. Similarly, we were reborn by faith into the freedom of God's kingdom. It's ours by right of the birth that God gave us in the water of Holy Baptism. That's just one example. There are other similarities that can be drawn between the freedom we have in the kingdom of the left, the state, and that which we have in the kingdom of the right, the church; but there are even greater differences.

As citizens of the United States, we are free to come and go where we please, take the jobs we want, marry whom we choose, buy and sell goods and land, and we can pick the forms of entertainment we desire. We can do pretty much whatever we want so long as it's legal. *That's* where our freedom ends. We are all very much subject to the law of the land. And if you break the laws, you are subject to punishment; they'll take your freedom away.

But the freedom we have in God's kingdom is different: it's freedom from the law itself. It's vital that we understand this. Before we came to faith in Christ, all of us were under the law of God. And because we were sinners who had broken the law, all of us stood condemned by it; deserving nothing but everlasting shame and suffering. Enter Jesus Christ, God's Son, who for our sake became man. He took the penalty of our sin upon himself and was condemned by the law in our place. He suffered, died, and rose again – all for us and for our sins. When through faith we trust in him, all of our sins past, present, and future are forgotten by God. What that means is that because Christ was condemned by the law for us, the law has lost its power to condemn us. That's exactly what St. Paul says, "Now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus". So, for those whose trust is in Jesus, the law has become a toothless tiger. It has no power to compel you to obey. The threat it once posed is gone. You're free of it.

Ah, but it often happens that people who come to faith in Christ don't really understand this freedom from the law. It's human nature to assume that the way to be a good citizen in the kingdom of God is exactly the same way you would be a good citizen of this free country; that is to say, by obeying the law. If you want to be a good American you work hard, pay taxes, do community service projects and so forth. And you don't break the laws. It's that sort of faithful service that makes you a good citizen. But you become an upstanding citizen of God's kingdom *not* through obedient and faithful service, but rather through faith in Christ—*period*. To make the mistake of thinking that your standing in God's kingdom depends upon your obedience to the law is to turn your trust from Christ and to reinvest the law with power that it no longer has. It's to be afraid of the tiger again. It's to surrender the very freedom that Christ has given you and to put yourself back under the threat and condemnation of the law.

This was the problem with the churches in Galatia. Paul had been a missionary in that area, and he had started a number of congregations there. After he left to spread the Gospel in new places, other teachers, claiming to be Christian but not really understanding their freedom in Christ came along. They convinced many people in these new congregations that being a Christian was about faith in Christ *and* obedience to the law – with a heavy emphasis on the latter. And again, it was an easy sell because people are naturally inclined in that direction – it

makes *natural* sense. But the Gospel isn't *natural*; it's *supernatural*. The main purpose of Paul's letter to the Galatians was to warn them against falling into the trap of thinking that they were still obligated to obey the law because ultimately that makes the cross of Christ of no effect. If Christ freed you from the law only to have you say, "Gee, thanks" and then place yourself back under its control, you've relinquished the whole purpose and power of the Gospel. You're no longer free. And if you fail to keep the law in any detail, then you're under its curse again. That's what Paul is saying in the first part of today's Epistle reading: "Christ set you free. Stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." This is the most common mistake in Christian theology. And that's why Paul is so emphatic about it.

But having spent most of his letter to the Galatians pounding this point home, in the remainder of today's reading, which comes from near the end of his letter, we see Paul issuing a warning about another danger. Keeping the faith true requires a certain amount of balance. There are two sides of a horse that you can fall from. (Actually, I can personally attest that it's possible to fall from the front and back ends of a horse also; but I'll admit that it takes a certain talent for falling that not everyone has. But hey, we all have our gifts ... Anyway,) It's easiest to fall off the horse of faith toward the side that puts you back under the law. That's the way most folks go. But if you truly understand what Paul is saying about how faith in Christ frees you from the law, that is, if you understand that you are under no obligation whatsoever to obey it, that it has no threat or force to compel you, *then* you might use your freedom in Christ to indulge yourself in every sinful excess that you can imagine. And why not, you may think, if I have immunity, why not take advantage of it and really live it up? Having that thought and acting on it is falling off the other side of the horse.

Christ did not free you from your sin and the curse of the law so that you could happily return to a life of piggish, self-absorbed sinning. That, says Paul elsewhere, would make you like a dog that got sick from something it ate and then turns around and eats its own vomit. You got rid of that nasty stuff that made you sick – *that would have killed you*. How can you now use your freedom to bring it back into your life? That's just dumb. And that's not what Christ freed you for. He had a higher, nobler purpose in mind. That purpose is *love*. He freed you from the law so that you could love in the same way that he loves. Only a person who is free in Christ is able to love.

It works like this: sin and love are opposites. Another way to say it is that sin is the absence of love for others. Or think of it this way: sin is the love of self. Real love, godly love, is focused outward. It seeks the good and wellbeing of others, and does not take into account self concerns. And love is always a voluntary thing – it has to be. If you *have* to serve and care for someone else against your will, we don't call it love; we call it slavery. The opposite of real love is sin or self-love. It's focused inward. It seeks personal gratification and pleasure. It promotes the self, always at the expense of others. Now, each of us was born into a state of sin. We are all primarily concerned with ourselves, always putting ourselves before others. And this state of sin is a form of bondage because in it, we are not free. Sure, it puts us under God's wrath and condemnation, which is enough of a prison; but it also makes it impossible for us to truly love. If my will is sinful, if I'm totally focused on myself, then the one thing I cannot do is put someone else's needs and concerns before my own. I will always first be seeking my own good. I may say, "I love you", and I may do nice things for you, but I'm always calculating what benefit I'm getting out of the deal – *and I can't help it*. And should I ever decide that the cost too far exceeds the benefit, well, then this relationship is over. I don't love you anymore – which only proves that I never did really *love* you at all (not *love* in a proper sense).

Now, take it a step further: to sinners such as we, trapped in this slavery of self love, God comes along and give us his laws: "This is how you are to behave. Do this, don't do that", and so on. This is a major problem, because as Paul tells us this morning: love is the fulfillment

of the law. That means that the laws are instructions for how to love for those who don't know how. If you could love, you could fulfill the law. And you would do so naturally. But love is one thing that a sinner cannot possibly do. Worse, because God's law commands me to do something that is against my sinful will, it puts me in yet another form of slavery. The law says, "Love your neighbor as yourself", which is something I can't do; but if I try anyway either because I'm afraid of God's punishment or because I'm trying to do what's right, it will always be opposed to what I *really* want to do, which is love myself and take advantage of my neighbor. And so we come to a strange paradox: as long as you *compelled* to obey the law, you cannot possibly do it. Compulsion means that it's against your will; and love, which fulfills the law, has to be free and voluntary. You have to *want* to do it.

If you're still with me, you should now be able to see why it is that only those who are free in Christ are able to love. First, having removed the power of the law to threaten and compel you, you are free to do what you want to do. There's no force being used against you. The Law says, "Love you neighbor as yourself." And you ask, "Oh yeah? What happens if I don't?" The answer is, "Nothing. As long as your trust is in Christ, the law cannot harm you." And please understand that I'm talking about your citizenship in God's kingdom here. If you rob a bank or something, the law of the land will still punish you. The point is that God won't. In his kingdom you are free from the law.

Of course, if the only thing that's changed for a Christian is the removal of the power of the law to force you to obey, you'd still be unable to love. The sinful nature in each of us is still completely self-focused and only wants to gratify itself. It would only use its freedom from the law's threats to keep on sinning with impunity. But there's another factor in play here. A person who has faith in Christ has been given a new nature by the working of God's Holy Spirit. This new nature is born of God and naturally wants to conform itself to him and to his ways. Like the Lord, the new nature given to you seeks the good of others, wants to give itself in service to others, and does not count the cost to self. The new nature in you is able to love like the Lord loves.

Now, it happens that this new nature exists within you side by side with the old, sinful nature. And the two are in conflict with each other. They want opposite things. One wants to take care of number one; the other says forget about me, how can I serve you? It's a struggle. But because you are free from the law, no one is forcing you. So the question you're constantly faced with is this: how will you use your freedom from the law? Will you choose to indulge your old, sinful nature, or will you follow the new spiritual nature? Which one will you allow to have the upper hand in your life?

One way to answer the question is to treat them like a pair of tomcats. You have the two, and they don't get along. So, which one will consistently win the fights? It'll be the one that you feed. If you indulge yourself in the sorts of things that Paul lists as the acts of the sinful nature like sexual immorality, impurity, hatred, jealousy, rage, selfish ambition, and so on, well, then that cat that will win. And Paul issues a warning there too. If you keep on behaving in those ways, if that's the way you use your Christian freedom, eventually that tomcat will kill the other. Your new nature will be driven out altogether and you will not inherit the kingdom of God.

On the other hand, if you keep feeding the new nature and make it strong, you can expect it to gain the advantage. And the way to feed that nature is to give it the food it craves, namely the Word of God. That's what gave it birth by faith, that's what gave it the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his forgiveness, and that's what gives it the power of the Holy Spirit to produce the fruits of the Spirit. Paul lists those as well: love, joy, peace, kindness, patience, gentleness, self-control, and so on. It's no coincidence that the first thing on that list is love. The others mostly describe what godly love is all about. The point is that if you feed that new nature what it

needs, you will naturally end up using your Christian freedom the way God intended for you to use it: for love.

That's one way to look at it: which one will you feed? And it's a good approach; but in today's lesson, Paul suggests a more radical way. He tells the Christian not just to avoid feeding the old nature. He says to put it to death. He writes, "Those who belong to Christ have *crucified* the flesh with its passions and desires." And he uses crucifixion as the method for destroying the sinful nature deliberately. That's because it presents us with a graphic picture of the struggle of the two natures within us. I've explained before that a person who is being crucified is in a state of terrible suffering. You have the skin flailed from your back, and then you're left hanging from nails driven through your feet and wrists. The weight of your own body is being used as a weapon against you as it strains aching muscles and pulls against throbbing wounds. It's awful. And the cruel genius of it is that it makes you your own worst enemy. If you're crucified, you would like nothing more than to die and be done with it; but you can't because your own flesh won't let it happen. The reason is that crucifixion kills by suffocation. While hanging from the arms, the victim is unable to inhale. He has to pull himself up with his legs to release the tension in his chest in order to get a breath. So the mind is saying, "All right, just stay down. You'll die and it will all be over." But the problem is that your body won't let you do it. There's an involuntary panic response that kicks in when you come close to suffocation. It causes you to do whatever is necessary to pull yourself up for another breath. It forces you up to breathe against your will. And so you end up prolonging your own agony against your will for the several days it may take until the body is at last too weak and too tired to get itself air.

It's not a pretty picture; but it's the one that Paul gives us of the internal struggle we have against our sinful natures. He would have us visualize it so that we would use our freedom in Christ to will the death of the old nature. He would have us recognize that it's the source of all the suffering, pain, and misery in our lives, to hate it accordingly, and fight to keep it down so that it dies. Yes, as long as it's there, it will manage to catch its breath against your will. In this life it never dies completely; but by actively forcing it down and holding it there with the power God's Spirit provides you to resist, you can weaken it so that its control is held to a minimum. In this way you are enabled to die to self and to live for Christ – and to show forth his love.

It's no coincidence that it was the same way Christ showed his love for you. That's how he used his freedom. He took the cross. He gave himself on it for you. And the interesting thing is that when he knew that he had paid the penalty of our sins, he said, "It is finished" and then he willed himself to die, which is something a normal person cannot do. What it shows is that he could have ended it at any time; but that he freely chose to stay there as long as it took to ensure that your salvation had been achieved. He used his freedom to serve you in love. And by it he gave you your freedom from the curse of the law.

What will you do with your freedom? May God give to each of us the Spirit and the will to take up the cross daily, to die to self and to live for others, and so to walk in the ways of love for which we have been set free by our Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!