

**“YOU ASKED FOR IT – WHAT IS CHRISTIAN FREEDOM
A Sermon by Richard D. Clewell
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TEXT: GALATIANS 5:1, 13-25**

On my recent trip to the former Iron Curtain countries that newly entered the European Union – Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – I was amazed at the preponderance of graffiti everywhere on buildings and monuments. It seemed to be so tragic and an apparent sacrilege of the beauty and history it marred. Our Czech tour guide made an interesting observation when the issue was raised. He said, “When people have lost their freedom over long periods of occupation, first by the Nazis and then the Russians, they have no sense of the limits on freedom and, therefore, do whatever they feel like doing or expressing.” This comment made a lot of sense to me and reveals a struggle that all human beings face in their everyday lives. This reminder certainly resonates with the conventional wisdom of American culture’s obsession with personal rights and the freedom of the individual. Focus on individualism has too easily distorted our definition of freedom and the constant demand for personal rights makes it appear like each of us exists in a vacuum. We observe these phenomena everywhere – in national discourses about freedom that take on the air of fourth of July oratory, in the sports world where contracts are no longer binding, in business where numerous major corporations operate with little concern for their customers or the public, in rugged individualism and demands for autonomy which literally means “self-law” and puts us at the mercy of ourselves.

Philosophers and theologians have raised questions about the possible problems of our management or mismanagement of human freedom. Do we enjoy too much freedom? We have freedom to harm and to kill each other, to fight small and global wars, to despoil our planet, to live without restraints as though we have neither responsibility nor awareness of consequences for our actions.

In contrast, the freedom spoken of in our epistle text has a much different emphasis and meaning. [Read Galatians 5:1, 13-25] The freedom spoken of here is freedom in Christ, a freedom that avers, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20). It is not a freedom that chants, as did the Corinthians, "all things are lawful for me" (1 Cor 6:12, 10:23). Rather, it is a freedom based on and modified by love, a freedom for life in relationship, in community, a freedom for mutual service in love. Such freedom is a response to the call of Jesus Christ that transforms from slavishly choosing the self-centered, self-serving actions and intentions described as works of the flesh to servanthood based in being loved and present with the Spirit, choosing to relate and care about your neighbor in the same manner. It is not rugged independence or inner liberty of conscience or will but rather a freedom experienced and exercised in a body of the faithful.

First then, it would seem apparent that Christian freedom from the apostle's perspective is defined as servanthood in mutual love. Because God has demonstrated his love in Jesus Christ, we in turn are freed up to choose to relate with genuine compassion and care for others. "Perfect love does overcome and cast out fear." This flies in the face of conventional wisdom which focuses on being number one and fears any suggestion that we might have less or be less than others.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it succinctly in his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, "The member of the Body of Christ has been delivered from the world and called out of it. He must give the world a visible proof of his calling, not only by sharing in the Church's worship and discipline, but also through the new fellowship of brotherly living. If the world despises one of the brethren, the Christian will love and serve him. If the world does him violence, the Christian will succor and comfort him.

If the world dishonors and insults him, the Christian will sacrifice his own honor to cover his brother's shame. Where the world seeks gain, the Christian will

renounce it. Where the world exploits, he will dispossess himself, and when the world oppresses, he will stoop down and raise up the oppressed. If the world refuses justice, the Christian will pursue mercy, and if the world takes refuge in lies, he will open his mouth for the dumb, and bear testimony to the truth. For the sake of the brother be he Jew or Greek, bond or free, strong or weak, noble or base, he will renounce all fellowship with the world. For the Christian serves the fellowship of the Body of Christ, and he cannot hide it from the world. He is called out of the world to follow Christ."

Freedom in Christ is directed by new leadership – the resident spirit within the person that frees him or her from loyalty to self-alone in all that entails. Paul contrasts the self-serving ways of people, the works of the flesh, with the gifts of the Spirit in those who in freedom are committed to serving Christ's unconventional way. Those gifts – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control are produced in a living on-going relationship in the transforming presence of Christ's Spirit. Marcus Borg calls this growing transformation "a journeying toward God that is also with God; as a journey from the life of bondage to life in the presence of God." (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*)

Christian freedom, therefore, is the continuing process of new life as Christ's people who are making a corporate journey toward their destiny in God and their transformation to being God's people. We often find ourselves tugged in two directions in this process. On the one hand we try to hold on to the way that is familiar out of comfort or fear. On the other hand, we struggle to act on our intentions and to risk the promised freedom that Christ has made possible. The Apostle Paul recognized his own struggle to exercise this freedom when he declared, "Wretched man that I am" – often not able to do what he wanted to do and often doing things he didn't want to do as a follower of Christ. He concluded that only the presence of Christ could enable him to overcome this dilemma. Isn't

this our dilemma as well? We, as he, can find the key to this transforming and freeing faith process in Christ's Spirit's motivation and direction within us.

Christian freedom is a on-going gift, not a one-time achievement. We are called to trust this process of dynamic maturing faith. Such freedom enables us to escape the bonds of narrow human judgments and prescriptions of "one size fits all;" it allows for creative uniqueness in the way we encounter the living Christ; it looses one from the anxiety about pleasing those who feel they have a "corner on what God wants' and from needing to meet the expectations imposed by those who fancy themselves as the guardians of order. We are accountable directly and only to God in whose service is perfect freedom and in love we act responsibly toward others.

Christian freedom is a daily reality with strength and vitality, the essence of faith working through love. Such faith is not a subjective mental attitude or an inventory of doctrinal beliefs. Rather, it is a trust lived out in practice. Faith is not a state of passive acquiescence but an action based on being loved by Christ who gave himself freely on our behalf. The story of the cross embodies faith working through love and our freedom in Christ corresponds to the way of the cross. It gives us courage to risk the unpopular actions on behalf of justice for others that in conventional wisdom is often discussed but seldom acted upon. In the Spirit's presence it enables us to express concern and compassion for sisters and brothers without hesitation about perceived differences and the conventional barriers of race, nation, class and gender which are overcome in the communion of the body of Christ's people.

Such freedom enables us to see more clearly our relationship to God in Christ – as servants to the Lord, to each other, and to the world. John Thompson, professor of New Testament at Abilene Christian University, observes, "People who live in this community know that the story of Christ's self-giving love is more than their foundational story; it is the norm for community life and a challenge to their own selfishness. - - - They have learned that the lives of others – even those that

limit our personal freedom – are more important than our own.” I pray for both you and me that such freedom may become a fuller and richer process in our lives.

Finally, this Christian freedom promises to produce joy rather than being experienced as a painful chore. It can open us to life in contact with others in dimensions we have not previously seen or even imagined. Jesus was “the man for others” in Bonhoeffer’s fine phrase. He kept himself free – free for the other person. He would accept almost anybody’s invitation to dinner, and as a result no public figure had a more diverse list of friends ranging from rich people, Roman centurions, and Pharisees to tax collectors, prostitutes, and leprosy victims. People liked being with Jesus; where he was, joy was. One wonders how much richer, fuller, and joyous our lives would be if we were more open and accepting while trusting our companion Spirit.

I believe that I have at times experienced such joy as my faith journey has developed – working with both army and Vietnamese friends in an unpopular war; engaging freely in relationships with a Buddhist monk and with Roman Catholic priests as true friends; joining survivors of war in their struggles to cast out their traumatic demons and to become whole again; encountering and encouraging numerous gay and lesbian friends here in northeast Ohio in their search for acceptance and full citizenship. I pray as another General Assembly meets this week that our denomination may experience anew this freedom based on Christ’s love and these works of the Spirit transforming stalemate and reaffirming God’s love for all people.

Therefore, with the Apostle Paul, let us in living by the Spirit also be led by the Spirit. Being a Christian is not about adherence to doctrines, creeds, rules and laws, or some litmus test of what “being saved” means. The first Christians received that name because of their love, their demonstration of Christ-like qualities of life. May we too experience this dynamic process of new life where there is freedom from fear and the love to trust the Spirit to grow our

relationships, to make us effective servants, and to enjoy the process of transformation from our way to the way of the cross. May the Spirit make it so – thanks be to God. Amen.

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