

Today is a good day to talk about freedom because it is in the scriptures. The apostle Paul ties freedom into our very beings as Christians.

SLIDE 1 – broken chains, Free To Serve

For the sake of freedom, freedom defined by the one true God, we are Christ's people, set free by the grace of God to love and serve the neighbor. Paul's letter to the Galatians declares that Christians are **free from** both enslaving powers and attempts to save themselves. Christ's saves us and makes us righteous. The vision of Paul is about the outcome of living into the faith one receives. Christian freedom is about calling God's people to be a blessing to the neighbor and of trustworthy service to the world. There are many ways for the Christian to discern what constitutes a blessing for a neighbor who walks the earth and what is trustworthy service in this world of complexities.

I remember the early 1970's with great joy! It was a time when personal liberties were advancing for women. I was grateful for a news clip the other evening that reminded me of three significant decisions which took place within 14 months. Two legislative actions I have solid memories of, the passage of Title IX (June 1972) and the Equal Rights Amendment in Congress (Oct 71 in the House and March 1972 in the Senate). As a kid I already was aware of inequities of pay for women and views that held women were of lesser value than men. With the passage of Title IX I looked forward to the prospect of participating in sports in ways similar to how boys were privileged to play. The third action was Roe vs. Wade where women gained a fundamental right to privacy in reproduction (Jan 73). Chains of exclusion were broken in those years and personal liberty for women was on the rise. Unknown to me at this time the Spirit of Christ was leading the way, with the ordination of the first woman in our Lutheran Church in 1970.

I remember my Mom taking me to a volleyball match and a girls' basketball game. I was eager to begin to play whatever sports were offered. It changed my outlook in life and changed how everyone viewed girls and women. Several years ago when I was one of the invited speakers for a community celebration in my home town I talked about the impact of Title IX. Suddenly girls who might not have been considered interesting became like goddesses on the court. They suddenly exuded power and strength and leadership which boys of middle and high school

age found very appealing. This was a time of the birth of the expansion of personal agency, equity, and ability. There was the beginning of a leveling of the playing field with all kinds of positive social consequences. I thought then that progress and expansion would increase forever.

The reading in Galatians is a reminder that opposing forces are part of daily life. Life is complex. For example, competition is common, sometimes becoming very serious as in wars, and other times just for fun. (There are things in the world which stand in stark contrast to the way of Christ.) I guess America's Funniest Videos has it right.

SLIDE 2 – Cats versus Dogs

We can create battles easily such as us vs. them or cats vs. dogs. In the TV show silly groups are pitted against each other. The group that will win and go on to the next round is anyone's guess. In our very real daily conflicts we are not content with arbitrary decisions. In today's scripture Paul gives a guiding principle, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

SLIDE 3 – Love Your Neighbor

We are those who are called to freedom. We are those who are exhorted to live by the Spirit of God and not by the flesh. We have been chosen for freedom in Christ.

To have been freed by Christ is to have been freed from the dire results of life lived apart from God.

To have been freed by Christ is to be called into ways that mirror God's ways, that is, a freedom dedicated to serving others in love.

We are freed to participate in a law, an instruction from God that is entirely contained in the great command from Lev. 19:18: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

You, the singular "you", each of you, each one of you.

Each one of you **love** your particular neighbor.

Paul reminds the Galatians that the kingdom of God is in sharp contrast to the empire of Caesar. The works of the flesh, the list of vices, show an exceptionally strong emphasis on community conflicts and tensions.

SLIDE 4 – Addiction Cycle

The list is long. From personal demons to systemic injustices, the order of life under the Caesar's of the world is more than happy to let people suffer. These vices are conflict-provoking which keep people caught up in the battle. These vices are practices that exclude people from the kingdom/empire of God. They exclude people from having what is needed for good daily life.

SLIDE 5- Payday Loans

Theologian Bridgett Kahl identifies them as the “combat order of Caesar’s empire.” This combat order seeks to control, enslave and conquer people and restrict their lives. It is far from the encouragement of the Spirit and the compassion of Christ. Such teachings inspire church leaders to find ways to change the world.

Seeing the damage payday lending was doing to communities, the Minneapolis Area Synod began advocating around 2010 for the state of Minnesota to make policy changes to cap the annual interest rate. Typically the average interest rates for these short-term loans are 400%. Bill Tesch, Bishop of the Northwestern Minnesota Synod is using his voice in Minnesota today. He was part of an Interfaith group in South Dakota which successfully passed legislation in 2016 in SD to establish a 36% interest rate cap on loans. Tesch said, “One thing that’s just a no-brainer issue for any of the major faith groups is the prohibition against usury and taking advantage of people with extremely high interest rates. It’s just very difficult to make any kind of theological case for that type of business practice.”

Paul provides two lists in our reading today. The fruits of the Spirit could be seen as descriptive of the law of Christ if we stick with this language like Paul does. In a conclusion to what can come forth from a life lived with the Spirit of God, Paul says, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” This then is a life where affection and appreciation of each other abounds, where people cannot wait to lend their hand to ensure that all have what they need; and where a sense of assurance permeates the day because the trajectory of an ever expanding life for all creation is in view because the way of Christ is trusted.

Paul wants to show how incredibly opposite these lists are. The whole of the law, the instruction from God is this, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul shows how this is the new way of life in Christ, recalling emphasis of Leviticus, and Jesus’ own accent to this word. Bruggemann calls this instruction the law of neighborliness, and notes its contrast to the law of Caesar that set one against another: “If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.” The imagery of biting and devouring summarizes practices that make community life impossible.

SLIDE 6 - Generosity

No wonder Paul accent concerns the “law of Christ” which is nothing more than the love of God for all people and all creation. The way of Caesar seeks to gain success by being right over against. Christ’s way is a way of righteousness and mercy for all.

The Lord of the Universe can be met only as the crucified Christ. Jesus comes as the despised, rejected, weak, slain Messiah of Good Friday so that either we accept him as he is or altogether miss him. As such, of course, he contradicts what people think one who comes to deliver should be and do. Helplessness, shame, and failure are no more a part of our religious expectations today than they were in the first century. To respond to Jesus implies not only coping with a historical figure of the past but with a continuing presence whose power is made known in weakness. He still chooses the foolish to confound the wise. He remains an affront to unjust systems, whether religious, social or political, which seek in some way to fit him into their existing power structure or to adjust his teaching so that it suits their thinking. But to adjust the gospel in this way is to remove the stumbling block, and the power of the cross.

SLIDE 7 – A Person of Courage

To follow Christ takes courage. Very often it is to do things that are rather simple but which others find infuriating because they do not wish you to succeed. Malala was one such person who stood up for the basics of education and was shot for doing such a simple and noble thing. When she recovered, she continued her goal of education and became a greater advocate for the right of girls to seek education in all parts of the world. Practicing the fruits of the Spirit...

SLIDE 8 – True Freedom

We are the ones whom Christ has set free. We are those called to freedom. We are those who are exhorted to live by the Spirit, in great love for the neighbor. Each of us are to find a particular neighbor to love, to be able to name that neighbor, and know what that neighbor needs, and find a way to help that neighbor to access what they need.