

Freedom (Part Two)

“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free”

Reflection 19 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Freedom is understood in many ways. For the apostle Paul, it’s primarily understood as freedom from religious law, specifically freedom from the Jewish law, but more universally freedom from any approach to God on the basis of law. In our unchurched age, this may seem self-evident to many, to the point of banality. But bear with me. Certainly for Paul, it mattered enormously. So in his Galatian letter, he writes in white heat. He anathematizes those who have turned Christ’s gospel of grace back into law (1:8-9) which he calls “no good news at all.” He laments those who have infiltrated the church to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus to make us slaves again (2:4). He is critical of those who force others to follow their own customs (2:14), those who seek to be right on the basis of observing law rather than trusting God (2:16-17), those who keep trying to attain their spiritual goals by human effort (3:3). He wonders what has happened to all the joy that came with first understanding Jesus (4:15). He concludes that the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (5:6). Finally in complete exasperation in one of the most astonishing verses in Scripture he wishes that these legalists would go the whole way and emasculate themselves (5:12).

Paul knows that nothing less is at stake than the salvation of the world because the only gospel, the only message, that has the power to change lives and free us from our egos, free us from our desperate cravings, free us from our paralyzing fears, free us from our attachments, free us from our own self-destructive behavior is that the One God of all the earth can emphatically be trusted. We can affirm this God and the life that God gives us, even in the most difficult of times. This is the one truth – that the God of all the earth can be trusted – that brings true freedom, freedom of the Spirit, freedom of the soul, the feeling that we are free, flying.

I wish then for all people today, all people everywhere, yes, the protection of your property, but also something more – that all people might one day find: the freedom that comes from LOVE, genuinely seeking out what is best for others, being lovingly attentive to others with no wanting whatsoever; the freedom that comes from JOY, a deep-seating contentment whatever’s happening; the freedom that comes from PEACE, inner serenity, centeredness and tranquility; the freedom comes from PATIENCE, when provoked, not being trapped by – and stuck in – your anger; the freedom that comes from KINDNESS, from understanding that the good life is not complicated or difficult, that it’s simply doing for others what you wish done for yourself; the freedom that comes from GOODNESS, going beyond the letter of the law to easy, natural generosity toward others; the freedom that comes from FAITHFULNESS, reliability and trustworthiness, being a person who can be counted on; the freedom that comes from GENTLENESS, humility, an openness to learning from life and from the wisdom of others; and the freedom that comes from SELF-CONTROL, mastering their cravings, passions and attachments.

These are of course the fruit of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians 5:22ff. These are not more things to do or be; they are, simply put, the pathway to freedom. And this we offer to all people everywhere from those who are just beginning to try to make sense of life to senior citizens who feel burnt out by their church experiences. So a woman in her 60s calls us from a small town in Pennsylvania, Church of Christ for years, but now wondering about women's roles in churches, finding that the traditional teaching on this no longer makes sense to her, and wondering if we might have answers for her. We do. We have answers for many people.

Or more to the point, God has answers for everyone: If you live by the Spirit of God, you'll find a new world in the morning. It'll be the life you've always wanted. You'll seek what is best for others; you'll do to others only what you'd want done to yourself. You'll learn the arts of easy, natural generosity, and so you'll find faithful companions, spiritual friends, you can trust. You'll see the beauty in the here-and-now. You'll see in the wonders of the ordinary the presence of the Spirit of God. You'll live vibrantly and expectantly, increasingly fearlessly. You'll tap into the creativity of God and live with enthusiasm, that is, with God-energy. You'll find contentment, joy whatever happens in your life. You'll let go of fear and self-consciousness and attachment to things, and you'll find serenity and peace. You'll learn to trust the flow of your life, to let things unfold as they should. You'll learn to relax with the idea that things are always changing – that things are always coming together and falling apart again, but that often it is in their falling apart that we find our healing and greatest opportunities. By the power of your trusting others, you will create in them – your children, friends, whomever – trustworthiness, and by the power of your love you will resurrect what is lovable in others. You will discover the deep satisfaction that comes from being a person on whom others can depend. You will learn to give away what you think you can't and to let go of what you think you can't, and you will watch your heart and mind grow ever larger in the process. You will be free to seek truth, fearing no question or no issue, knowing that the Spirit of God will lead you into all truth, will lead you to see things as they are. And so you will learn to connect to bigger and bigger perspectives – to larger and kinder stories.

In short, you will discover freedom. So, yes, we celebrate the freedom this nation stands for, but freedom we must never forget goes way beyond private property into the deeper and higher realms of the soul. And only there, in that transcendent place, when we cross the Selma bridge of our souls, do we really learn to be free.

Through Christ then, through faith in God, through really trusting God, you are called to: freedom from the things that trap you, from the places you're stuck; freedom from fear, even and especially the fear of death; freedom from outdated law, tradition and dogma; freedom from prejudice and patterns of discrimination; freedom from shame, guilt and regret; freedom to see the sacred in everyday life; freedom to know the truth, to see things as they really are, freedom to receive with pleasure the wisdom of others; freedom to expect and pray for "the impossible;" and freedom to become the people we were born to be.

May you come to commune with God directly with all that you do and say and think. Every day. All the rest of the way. May you let go of everything that keeps you from being one with God. May there be nothing between you and the God who is love. Absolutely nothing. In this lies freedom. May you experience the sheer joy of being alive and alive forever. May you be animated, energized by trust. May you live vibrantly, radiantly. May you be free, free from sin, free to get things done, free to think, free from fear, free to follow your now mature deepest desires and dreams. And may you come to see that so much more is possible in your life and in the lives of those you love than you ever imagined.

– Dale Pauls