

FREEDOM & RESPONSIBILITY

John 21: 1-19

Freedom. it's one of the most popular words in our world today, isn't it? Everyone wants more freedom these days – freedom from a pandemic and pandemic restrictions, freedom from isolation and from having to wear a mask. Of course, there is the freedom of the truckers convoy and freedom from vaccine mandates. There is freedom over one's body and women over their bodies as abortion rights are being repealed down south in the U.S. There is Elon Musk, one of the richest men in the world, buying up Twitter to ensure freedom of speech on social media. Freedom is the most popular word on protest signs and social media posts the world over. Everyone wants more freedom. Freedom is an uncontested good. Nobody can legitimately have any issues with freedom can they?

Well, it depends doesn't it? What if my desire for greater freedom causes hurt and harm to someone else? What if my freedom of action, freedom of speech or freedom of opinion causes someone else to suffer whether that is my intention or not? Am I to feel responsible for that? Is it my business how others are affected because of my freedom?

Here's where we need to make some important distinctions. It's all about context. And in this regard, let me begin by identifying two very different kinds of freedom.

1) First, there is **freedom to be**. Think about anyone who has ever been enslaved in our world. Think about anyone who has had to live their identity in hiding because exposing it would bring on persecution and harm? Whether you are a person of colour, indigenous, gay, trans, non-binary... whether you wear a hijab in certain places... whether you live in parts of the world like Russia, China or Iran where personal freedoms are curtailed and certain behaviours are enforced... whether you live in places like Ukraine or Eritrea, or whether you are an Uyghur in China, Rohingya in Myanmar or a woman in Afghanistan or Saudi Arabia... Freedom is a powerful word, a word that is precious, a word that you fight for often at great personal risk and cost.

Why do so many refugees the world over seek out asylum and a home in places like Canada? Canada is envisioned as a place where you are free to be who you are, where your rights as a person with your distinctive identity are respected. You are free to be here in a way you have not experienced freedom from the place you are fleeing.

2) And this brings us to a second kind of freedom quite different than the freedom to be, and that is the **freedom to harm**. This is the kind of freedom those with privilege and power possess and bandy about. Freedom of speech is often held up as a sacred right even when my speech causes harm to someone who has been historically victimized by people like me. If I am white and part of the dominant culture of settlers in Canada, what I say about

indigenous people, people of colour, those whose sexuality and gender expression don't fit the traditional norm... what I say, can be very harmful and hurtful. Is my resistance to every restriction of my freedom of speech legitimately claimed and dismissed as "political correctness"? Should my freedom not also serve my fellow human being rather than tear them down? Is there no way for me to express my concerns and even criticisms in a way where I respect how someone wants to be addressed or engaged so that they feel respected rather than triggered in terms of how they've been historically mistreated?

Freedom to harm is no freedom worth having and it is no freedom worth legitimating. This is why just as important as the word freedom is the word responsibility. In the ancient biblical story of the siblings Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, Cain believes he is free to kill his brother because his brother's actions have offended him. There is no one around and therefore he believes he is responsible to no one but himself. Survival of the fittest. And yet, once he has buried his brother and feels totally free of him, he hears the voice of God in the voice of his conscience: What have you done Cain? The blood of your brother is crying up from the earth on which it has been shed. But Cain protests: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Am I responsible for my brother? Am I not free? The answer, of course, is that any imagined freedom that leads to harm toward another life within God's creation is not the kind of freedom that is legitimate.

Our responsibility for the life around us is just as critical as is our freedom. Some of us may not like any limits to our freedom, but that doesn't make it right. Why do we have laws about smoking in public, or covid vaccine mandates or many other public health measures where the freedom to opt out or ignore the rules is seriously curtailed by fines and other forms of pressure. We are always struggling as societies to balance individual freedoms with social responsibilities. We are our siblings' keepers. We are responsible, especially for those more vulnerable than ourselves.

3) And this brings us to our third and more profound insight when it comes to freedom as balanced by responsibility. And to get us there, let's zero in on our scripture reading this morning in search of revelatory wisdom. Our reading is one of several episodes where the disciples encounter the risen Christ. Each episode involves some special encounter with a particular disciple. In this case, it's Peter. The last time Peter would have seen Jesus was just before Jesus was crucified. Peter had made great claims for himself, namely that he would stand by Jesus whatever happened. He was even ready to die to defend Jesus.

And yet, what actually happened? When the authorities came for Jesus with armed soldiers, Peter ran away. And even as he came near where Jesus was being held and questioned, when someone approached him and asked him whether he was associated with Jesus he denied it, not once, not twice, but three times! Peter had a fear in him he never knew was there until the critical hour. When he realized what he'd done, he ran away and wept in shame.

And now, after all that, Jesus somehow reappears. The disciples have given up on their mission with Jesus and have returned to their old jobs as fishermen. On this particular day they're having no luck finding fish. But then, this stranger standing at the distant shore tells them to try another spot. Who is he? It's Jesus, of course, but they fail to recognize him. Why? Well imagine the last time they would have seen Jesus. He was brutally tortured and killed. It doesn't matter what this stranger looks like it could never be Jesus. And yet, once they follow his advice and get loads of fish in their nets, they realize it can only be Jesus!

And Peter? He's so excited, he can't wait for the boat to get to shore with all the fish. He dives into the water and swims for shore. He has to see Jesus for himself up close and personal. But what about all the shame and regret? Somehow, his excitement has made him forget about all that. But not for long. Once they've all got to the shore and had some breakfast, Jesus takes Peter aside for a bit of a one on one chat. Jesus asks Peter a hard question: Do you love me more than these? In other words, do you love me more than this life, this job you're doing, whatever else you're attached to right now, even your own safety... Do you love me more than these Peter? And Peter answers: "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus then replies: "Feed my lambs." In other words, if you really love me and choose to follow me as you said you would before I was killed, then I'm calling you to take care of our people, to be their leader, to give it all and risk it all.

And Jesus asks the question again and again, three times in all, just as many times as Peter denied Jesus before. Peter is hurt that the question keeps coming back to him. Does Jesus not believe him? Does Jesus not trust him? Will Jesus not forgive him and give him a second chance to make things right?

Well, Jesus goes on to tell him this: "Very truly I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go..." In other words, you will be arrested and no longer be free. And then, we read: "(Jesus said this to Peter to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God)." In other words, Peter would die just like Jesus died, because he has loved the lambs, the believers, those vulnerable and persecuted by authorities antagonistic to Jesus' gospel of love and justice. In the end, Peter will have overcome his fear and chosen love over his own safety.

OK, beautiful story about love even as it is also tinged with sadness. But what does it teach us about freedom and responsibility? Well, Peter was free when he chose to deny Jesus and run away. Peter was free, and yet, he was also imprisoned by his fear. Fear makes us do all kinds of things even when we believe we are free in the doing. The paradox is that Peter will only become free when he loves, even when such love will threaten his safety. The greatest kind of freedom is the kind of freedom to choose love because we are empowered

by love. Making choices however free we imagine them to be, based on misinformation, fear, hate, prejudice or selfishness is no freedom worth having.

And yet, Jesus also never threatens Peter or anyone else. In order to really be free we must learn how to love, but in order to love we must freely choose it. Love binds us and compels us, but only choices out of love and for love are truly free choices. This also means that love absorbs the risk of refusal. People need freedom to choose differently than we advise them to choose. Even if we have all the right arguments and motivations because we care, if someone chooses not to do something to their body, we need to leave some measure of freedom otherwise we become totalitarian, dictatorial and tyrannical.

And let me end with a very practical example: vaccine mandates. Social responsibility based on the best information we have says vaccines are critical to advancing public health. But Freedom demands we stop short of forcing people to get vaccinated even if we believe it's in everyone's best interest to do so. Love demands both social responsibility and freedom to choose. Peter was free to betray his Lord and friend. Jesus was hurt by that. But the love in Jesus was also free to absorb that betrayal and hurt and find a way to build a bridge toward reconciliation. His love also opened a new pathway for Peter to get a second chance to choose love in freedom even if it would risk his safety.

We too, my friends, must make room for people to disagree with us and choose differently, even if it makes our lives more difficult. Rather than blame and shame people who don't get vaccinated, why not target those weaknesses in our public health long neglected: our health care system, long term care, respect and appropriate remuneration for PSWs and other health care professionals. We need to provide better support in all the ways people are vulnerable.

We need to take responsibility collectively as a society if we are to better love, rather than take away freedoms, especially when it comes to people's own bodies. What Jesus' way with Peter teaches us is that unless our actions and words come from a place of love, care and concern, they cannot be free. We have to be responsible for the welfare of our neighbour. At the same time, love leaves room for others to be and to choose, even if that is not in our best interests. That's love too. Love respects freedom to refuse even as it promotes social responsibility.

Peter found his freedom when he found the courage to love even if it would cost him everything. What about you and me? Does love compel us or does fear drive us? Do we blame and shame people because they don't conform to the rules we adhere to? Or does love also compel us to give them space to choose for themselves even if it creates some risk for us too? May we all support one another, and especially those most vulnerable, the "lambs" among us we are called to love.

Amen.