

Freedom's Purpose

Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Matthew 11: 25-30

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost, (July 5) 2020

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The meaning of freedom begins with the still small voice of conscience, where each of us decides what we will live and die for.

- Bill Moyers

I suppose there is no more important word in our society than the word “freedom.” These days, part of the hostility about wearing masks uses the language of freedom. Anti-mask wearers say, “The government telling me that I must wear a mask is an infringement of my freedom.” Protestors last week in Austin at the State Capitol called mandated mask-wearing a “medical tyranny.” Also last week, Vice President Pence said that it was the constitutional right of a person to catch COVID-19 if they wanted to. Of course, this week, things are changing fast. Texas Governor Abbot has mandated the wearing of masks in Texas as the COVID-19 numbers spike.

Mask wearing has become one of our most noticeable features of two views of freedom. Freedom defined as freedom from any restrictions that I, as an individual do not like – I don't want anyone telling me to wear masks. Or freedom defined as freedom for responsibility and freedom for the common good – I wear masks because I am responsible for helping not spreading the virus.

Freedom as defined as freedom from was expressed by Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas in 1952, who said, “The right to be left alone is the beginning of freedom.” Harvard preacher, Peter Gomes, said about Justice Douglas’ comment, “It is hard to tell whether he was simply summing up the American conventional wisdom on the subject or he was a prophet of the societal trends that would, for better or worse, define the second half of the twentieth century, that age that would from time to time fancy itself as the ‘American century.’” (from *The Good Life*, p. 162).

The right to be left alone. The freedom to choose. The freedom not to wear masks. The freedom to do whatever I want – this seems to be the primary way, certainly the most popular way, Americans define freedom. However, as much as everyone in our society believes in freedom, there is little agreement as to why we have freedom. What is freedom for? We say “freedom” so much that it becomes a mantra. But what is the purpose of freedom? Our society has given us the freedom to get what we want but has given us so little guidance in wanting that which is worth having.

Traditionally, freedom has not been understood as a goal or purpose in itself. Our goal is not to be free. Freedom has been understood as a condition by which worthy goals can be pursued. Our goal is to be free for something – something bigger, something more important. So, we must pay attention to the goal of freedom and ask such questions as, “Whose freedom?” and “Which freedom?” and “Freedom from what?” and “Freedom for what?”

The biblical Exodus story is the great freedom narrative. The people of God

are set free from the bondage of Egypt. But the biblical story is very clear that the people of God were not simply set free from Egyptian slavery; they were set free for the worship of God. The purpose of their freedom was the worship of God.

At the heart of biblical wisdom is the paradoxical claim that we will find true freedom only as our lives serve God, the highest good. Or as the old Book of Common Prayer said it, “O God, in whose service is perfect freedom.”

The Apostle Paul said in his letter to the Galatians, a remarkable letter of freedom, “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). He goes on to say, “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another” (Gal. 5:13). We are freed to serve. Then Paul says that the way to do that is by cultivating the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5: 22-23). Again, the paradox: In Jesus Christ we are set free to pursue the fruits of the Spirit; at the same time, pursuing the fruits of the Spirit are the ways we embody and practice our freedom. In Christ we are freed from slavery of the flesh so we will walk in the Spirit and serve God and serve one another.

These old notions of freedom defined freedom in terms of responsibility and commitments and discipline. Free to do what you wanted was just another way of being enslaved. Augustine said in his *Confessions* that when he was a young man, he lived a rather carefree, sometimes wasteful existence, and even fathered a child out of wedlock. Then his life became caught up in Christ. He was converted. After

his conversion, he said that freedom means to be whom God intends us to be. Only as our lives, our desires, our passions, are bent toward God do we discover what freedom is.

It is a great freedom to find our lives caught up in the plans and purposes of God.

In today's gospel, Jesus calls us to follow him; to take up his yoke, his burden. The idea of being yoked - submitting ourselves to Christ's authority over us, agreeing to be obedient to his will, being yoked - is a concept difficult for most of us to embrace. We don't like the word "authority" - anyone having authority over us, and we are not comfortable with the whole notion of being "yoked" to anyone. The Apostle Paul refers to the "yoke of slavery," so we're asking what's the difference in being yoked to Christ? We like having more control than that, even with God. Many of us prefer to know what the rules are and figure out how to meet them on our own. We're good at doing what is necessary to get ahead - in school, in business, in social circles - why should our spiritual life be any different? Just tell us what the requirements are, and we'll decide how to fulfill them. We are a "get-er-done" church - a congregation of high achievers and being yoked to anyone else slows us down, gets in the way, or trips us up, entangles our freedom.

I mention all of this because some of those hearing Jesus were religious leaders who were all about being high-achieving-get-er-done kinds of people.

Speaking to such over-achievers, Jesus said, "my yoke is easy and my

burden is light.” It was God’s desire, through Jesus Christ, to lighten our burden, to increase rather than diminish our freedom. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor says, “It isn’t about pushing ourselves to do more, driving ourselves to be more; all God has ever asked is that we belong to him.”

The burden that Jesus offers is much lighter than the one we design for ourselves, the yoke easier. No longer do we have to listen to that nagging inner voice that says you've got to do more, be more to prove yourself worthy of God’s love. There are no pre-qualifying exams that you have to pass before you come to Jesus. We have nothing to prove and perhaps even more importantly nothing to fear. For his yoke is not a heavy shackle to chain our freedom, but a way of coming into relationship with him so that our burdens might be shared, and our loads lightened.

Have you ever seen pictures of two animals yoked? They are joined at the neck by a wooden frame which allows them to work together. With a well-matched pair, they can work all day without wearing out because under a shared yoke one can rest while the other pulls. They can take turns bearing the brunt of the load and cover for each other without ever laying their burden down. At the end of the day, they may be tired, but they are not exhausted because they have worked together as a team.

When we accept the yoke of Christ he doesn’t add to our burden, he takes our burden upon himself to share our load. We are joined together with Christ, his heart and our heart, his mind and our mind, working together to share the burdens of life and to fulfill the requirements of love. We become a team and with

his help we can accomplish more than we ever could individually. One scholar points out that, “The yoke is not one that Jesus imposes but one that he wears. . . It is as if he is saying, ‘Become my yoke mate, and learn how to pull the load by working beside me and watching how I do it. The heavy labor will seem lighter when you allow me to help you with it.’”

When we become yoked to Jesus, we become apprentices who work beside him to learn through watching and doing what it means to be his disciples. Our wills, our desires, our lives are linked to those of Christ Jesus. And over time, we learn to desire what Christ desires, to do what Christ does. Our consciences become shaped like the conscience of Christ. As we walk with Christ and we get our stride in tandem with Christ’s then we begin to discover true freedom. When we decide that we want to become a follower of Jesus, it means we commit ourselves to a learning process. We don’t start out knowing it all - and we don’t need to. We only have to be willing to let Jesus teach us - how to deal with the problems we face, how to develop our best skills and minimize our weaknesses, how to grow and change, how to let go of the things that get in the way, how to be obedient even when it is difficult, how to be in a loving relationship and how to serve.

Being yoked to Christ is a life-long process of learning a new stride, being trained in new desires, and learning to see and listen in new ways. Rather than being defensive, building walls, and getting our guns – especially we white people, for example, learn that walking in tandem with Jesus means learning about white supremacy and learning how to give it up, repent of it. Talk about being yoked to something that is killing white people, killing people of color, killing the entire

Creation – white supremacy and privilege is killing all of us! When we are yoked to Christ, we can let that white privilege go, leave it behind, and say, “Goodbye! And good riddance!” We can throw our guns away and join the movement walking with God, walking with Christ, being yoked to one another in Christ.

Jim Wallis tells this story of being in South Africa during the waning days of Apartheid. He said, “I’ll never forget my first day at St. George’s Cathedral in Cape Town, South Africa. A political rally had been called but had been canceled by the government, so Archbishop Tutu said, ‘Okay, we’re just going to have church then.’ And church he had. They gathered together in that Cathedral and the police were massing by the hundreds on the outside and they were there to intimidate, to threaten, to try and frighten all the worshipers. The police were so bold and arrogant they even came into that Cathedral and stood along the walls. They were writing down and tape recording everything that Archbishop Tutu said. But he stood there to preach, and he said, ‘This system of apartheid cannot endure because it is evil.’ Then he pointed his finger at those police standing along the walls of his sanctuary and said, ‘You are powerful. You are very powerful, but you are not gods and I serve a God who cannot be mocked.’ Then he flashed that wonderful Desmond Tutu smile and said, ‘So, since you’ve already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!’”

When he said that, the whole crowd, the entire congregation erupted with a shout of joy. People laughed, clapped, and started singing: *We are marching in the light of God*. As they burst forth in song, they started dancing. As they sang the second stanza, *We are living in the love of God*, everyone was dancing together and began moving around the cathedral. And as they sang the third stanza, *We are*

moving in the power of God, they burst forth from the cathedral and past the police barricades and out into the street, singing, dancing in joy, exuberance, and with the freedom that comes with being yoked with Christ.

I don't know about you but that's the kind of yoke I want.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.