

In Whose Service is Perfect Freedom

Galatians 5:1,13-25

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost, (July 7) 2019

Kyle Childress

Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas said in 1952, “The right to be left alone is the beginning of freedom.” The late and great 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.’” (*The Good Life*, p. 162).

The right to be left alone. The freedom to choose. The freedom to do whatever I want. We have so much personal freedom; perhaps more than ever. 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. 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 so they could worship 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 this 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 (self-serving desires), but through love be servants (slaves) of one another” (Gal. 5:13). Paul is saying that we are freed from self-centered sin in order 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 powers of sin and death 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 profligate 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 who 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.

Over in Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Jesus calls us to follow him; to take up his yoke, his burden. Remember that a yoke was used to pair up oxen in order to plow a field. When we take on Christ’s yoke, we are not alone. We are yoked to Christ. Our wills, our desires, our lives are linked to those of Christ Jesus. And as we walk with Christ, and get our stride in tandem with Christ’s then we begin to discover true freedom. That is why Jesus says his yoke is easy, and his burden is light.

Years ago, when I lived in Atlanta, I was at the home of Ken and Nancy

Sehested, when we all could not find their youngest daughter, Alana. Alana was about four at the time, and Ken and Nancy started calling for her and she did not answer. Her older sister, Jessica, joined in the subsequent search. I went outside around back where there was a vacant lot and walked and ran through weeds and brush, oblivious to any abrasions or rough ground, calling her name. After a few minutes, Alana was found. She had been playing in the kitchen and had crawled into the cabinet and gone to sleep.

I know that a certain amount of my obliviousness to abrasions and rough ground was due to adrenalin. But it also had to do with pursuing a goal worthy of my total effort and one that consumed my attention. It was also a goal that called upon me to coordinate with others, pay attention, listen, and maybe even being fleet of foot. In other words, fruits I had cultivated so they could be used when called upon. At that moment, there was nothing in my life more important than finding Alana and I used all my skills, all my fruits.

That is something like when our lives are caught up in the purposes of Christ. The yoke becomes easy and the burden light. And that is when we discover that service in Christ is perfect freedom.

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

Now, let us stand and confess our faith. We'll read the Apostles' Creed together.