

Freedom

1 Corinthians 9: 19-23

Freedom is like a coin with two sides: privileges and duties. The promise of faith is that we're set free from whatever it is that holds us back or has us stuck. The hope of faith is that we're free to fly and to live large. The potential of faith is that we're free to become fully human and to take our place as partners with God in the shaping of our lives. Freedom is a powerful way to live, but freedom isn't free.

The Apostle Paul was writing to the Corinthians about freedom. What was he saying to them? What is he saying to us? By way of background, the letter from Paul we call 1st Corinthians, was written for the purpose of answering three big questions that this challenging group of Christians had. The first question was about marriage. The second was about eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. The third concerned the relative importance of spiritual gifts, especially the practice of speaking in tongues.

Today's scripture passage comes as part of Paul's response to the "food sacrificed to idols" question. The reality of Roman socio-economics, especially in the provinces such as Corinth, was that the primary source of meat for the poor (most people) were those occasions when the wealthy and powerful patron sponsored a great feast to celebrate the gods and honor the Emperor. Animals were slaughtered as a sacrificial gift and then their meat was served to all the people of the particular town at a big *barbecue*.

The question had arisen among the Corinthian Christians, both Jews and Gentiles, should Christians refuse to eat this meat? Was it tainted for having been offered to idols? Paul answers "No". There are no such gods anyway so these idols don't matter. There's no problem. Offering the animals to idols doesn't mean a thing in reality.

For several in that Christian community, this was a real sticking point, especially the Jewish Christians. In their tradition, meat once offered to idols became tainted. Eating this meat represented a violation of the Levitical holiness code. It was an apostasy and, evidently, the practice of Christians eating this meat had caused some to leave Christianity.

Because of this, Paul writes that would not eat this meat, even though he would have the right to do so. He claimed the freedom to choose not to eat this meat so as not to offend those within the fellowship and also potential converts to Christian faith who might be sensitive about this practice.

Paul writes, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them." Paul sees himself "free [through Christ] of the demands and expectations of everyone," including the demands of the Jewish Law and holiness code. Consequently, he was free to choose his behavior based on his own faith values and priorities. Paul was so committed to his mission of reaching people with the good news of God's love as seen in Christ that he felt it his duty to limit his freedom for the sake of that deeper commitment.

The truth of faith sets us free. The promise of faith in Christ sets us free from whatever is holding us back. The hope of faith in Christ sets us free to fly, to dream, and to follow that dream. The potential of faith sets us free to become fully human. This potential is to realize God's promise hidden in our lives at our birth to become partners with God in the shaping of our lives. This potential is to take our place as partners with God in the shaping of our lives. Freedom is a powerful way to live, but freedom isn't free.

Today's sermon is part of the current sermon series called *The Nuts and Bolts of Christian Living*. On the journey of faith and discovery, we each face choices about freedom: to embrace it or to turn away from it

The first choice we face is will we embrace the *freedom from*? Faith promises that we are free from whatever binds us or imprisons us or has us stuck. What imprisons us can be literal bars. It can be a religious tradition (like the Corinthians). It can be unresolved anger or bitterness, or the residue of abuse. It can be a relationship or even the results of a lifetime of success.

Faith promises that we are free from what binds us, holds us back, or oppresses us. We must choose not to give up. We must choose to persevere in the struggle to realize our freedom. In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Morgan Freeman's character has spent nearly a lifetime in prison. When finally released, he discovers that prison is even more of the mind and spirit than of the body. The freedom of release brought personal responsibility and it took him much longer to begin to embrace freedom in his soul.

We at Crossroads love our freedom. *Come as you are! Worship as you're comfortable.* We're free to follow our own path, yet how free are we? It seems that, sometimes, we're caught between comfort of being community with familiar faces, sharing a common history that extends way back, and the pull of being open to new ideas, new relationships, and new direction.

Sometimes, we get stuck between our cherished adversarial relationship with much traditional Church structure, practice, and doctrine, and what seems to be our emerging call to help reform the Church from within. Sometimes we seem to be prisoners of our desire for personal freedom, with everyone on his/her own journey and the conflict with our need for identity and direction as a body.

The same questions face us as individuals that challenge us as a congregation. What binds you? What has you trapped or caught? Where are you imprisoned? What will it look like to be free? What will it feel like to embrace your freedom? The first choice is, "Will you be free from what binds you?"

The second choice of freedom is, "What are we free to do?" What are the possibilities of freedom in faith? You are free to dream. You are free to imagine. You are free to not keep what we dream or image to yourself. What possibilities can you imagine for this congregation?

There is a dark side in this freedom to dream and to imagine. The dark side comes when we try to hide from our freedom: deny the imagining or defer the dreaming.

"What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore -- and then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over -- like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?"

(Langston Hughes)

We have the freedom to choose. We do not, however, have freedom from the consequences of our choices and non-choices. Yet, how many of us live with consequences of dreams deferred, dreams denied, and dreams obscured.

We have a third choice with regard to freedom. This is the freedom to become. You have the choice to become all you can be as a person. In the balance of freedom, you can retain

the freedom of all possible choices, but then you give up the freedom to explore any of those choices in depth.

Life is full of such choices. Crossroads Church gives up the freedom of renting, thus reserving cash, in order to buy and invest in a church house. The stunning result has been cash through our capital campaign. More than this, however, is the freedom we now have to explore the depths and breadth of our potential as church. We can shape a space that will help shape us for years to come.

The choices you make in your life will limit your freedom to have other choices. The ability to have career or family will limit our freedom. Those very choices give us freedom to explore the depth and breadth of vocation and relationship.

We make choices of faith. The freedom we may have to live for self-gratification, caring only for own privilege and power, means a choice to live out of touch with much of the world. It is a choice that puts us out of synch with Jesus' teachings. It puts us at odds with what we know, through him, of God's values – the underlying values of life itself. There really is no risk in such a choice because there is no chance, along this pathway, to experience abundant life.

The choices we make to follow a pathway of discipleship and let go our freedom of choices. This itself leads through a narrow gate to the depth of life, to the breadth and height of life. It is an experience otherwise inaccessible. The choice of discipleship is a winding road through a narrow gate that leads to life. It carries the risk of hardship, grief, and financial challenge (the assurance of financial challenge) and the denial of non-authentic self. Ultimately, it is the only way to life.

A vision, retold by Julian of Norwich (14th c.) --

“This word, ‘You will not be overcome’ was said very distinctly and firmly to give us confidence and comfort for whatever troubles may come. He did not say ‘You will never have a rough passage, you will never be over-strained, you will never feel uncomfortable,’ but he did say ‘You will never be overcome.’ God wants us to pay attention to these words, so as to trust him always with strong confidence, through thick and thin. For God loves us and delights in us and wills that we should love and delight in God in return, and trust God with all our strength. So all will be well. And then he vanished, and I saw no more.”

(Revelations of Divine Love)

The promise of faith is that 1. we are free from whatever binds us. We are free to dream and to fly. We are free to become all we can be to fulfill our calling in partnership with God. But always, we are free to choose.