



Freedom

Rev. Chandler Stokes

Galatians 5:1, 13-14

The Tenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

June 7, 2015

Scripture

¹For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery....

¹³For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”¹

Introduction

For at least the first part of the summer, we will be working on something called the Vocabulary of Faith. We’ve taken some big words that are in common usage in the public and also in common usage in the community of faith, and we’re going to talk about the ways in which these words are used differently in the vocabulary of faith.

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Over these past few months, we have been trying to listen closely to Sherrill Vore as she approaches her retirement at the end of this month. And at our Session meeting in May, we asked her about one of the more important ideas about church that emerged in the twentieth century—one that Sherrill has taught us. We asked her to say again what John Westerhof, who is the source of this idea, taught. In essence it this: a healthy congregation needs to worship together, learn together, and do faithful acts of service together—worship, learn, and serve together. As we were exploring the implications of that view, Sherrill said that the key word is *together*. We need to worship, learn, and serve... together.

Together isn’t easy. In fact, it’s harder even than we often imagine. Following Jesus is all well and good; it’s following Jesus with all the other people following Jesus that’s the challenge.

I think we *assume* that Christians are a community, that we are not solitary. Most of us know the Scripture: “You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” We *belong* to one another: the eye, the hand, the foot, all belong to one body—we belong to one another, we belong together. We understand, in theory at least, that we are community. However, community is not as much a given in our lives as it once was.

When I was at the NEXT Church conference in Chicago, back in March, my friend Tom Are talked about the changing landscape of American life. He quoted James Davidson Hunter, of the University of Virginia, who said, “Community is no longer *natural* in late modernity, and so *community will require intentionality* that it is *unfamiliar* and perhaps *uncomfortable* for both Christians and churches.”

Why, if we *know* that the church is by its very nature community, why is the very notion of community unfamiliar and uncomfortable?

¹ Galatians 5:1, 13-14.

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It is simply because the culture undermines the value of community. Society is regularly telling us in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that we *don't* belong to one another. It says, sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly, that what makes us strong is standing on our own. We have ceased to be citizens of one another. There's even a hostility toward community; independence is what society extols—not our “together,” not our belonging to one another. “But,” Tom says, “they don't use that language; they use the language of freedom.”

I remember in my high school English and debate classes we were encouraged to formulate our first ethical propositions and argue for them. What was ethical? And while listening to Tom, I remembered those ethical debates. I remembered where they came from.

In 1859 John Stuart Mill wrote a book called *On Liberty*. In it, he makes the case for individual freedom. It was widely read and widely influential in America. Mill believed that people should be free, and that freedom is realized when our choices to do whatever we want are unencumbered. That is freedom. The only limit to my choosing is if I cause harm to my neighbor. Short of that, I cannot be free, unless my choices are unencumbered.

That was the maxim that we all started with, that we all took for granted, back in high school. It made sense to us. And I don't remember anyone really ever successfully challenging that basic ethical proposition. It was too visceral for us as teens. There were plenty of nuances about what constituted *harm to others*, but the basic idea was that freedom was *by definition* “doing whatever I want.” Mill put a fine point on it. He said, “Over oneself the individual is sovereign.”

It *seems* undeniable—that's the way we experience freedom: I get to make my own choices. It's a powerfully clear definition, but it is also amazingly immature. No wonder it appealed to us back then. When I am unencumbered, unimpacted by others in my choices, in that moment I am not free; I am alone. The only way for me to be unencumbered in my choices is for me to be devoid of any relationship that might place expectation on me.

As Tom said:

“You simply cannot adopt this definition of freedom and, say, be married. You simply cannot adopt this definition of freedom and have children. You can't adopt this definition of freedom and be a friend that anyone would trust.” You can't adopt this definition of freedom and have any idea of what Paul is talking about when he says, *For freedom Christ has set us free*.

Tom: “The only way for my choices to be *unencumbered* is for me to be alone. What John Stuart Mill describes is not *freedom* but *isolation*. This theory of freedom is ubiquitous in American culture, which says, ‘I cannot be who I am unless I am free of you, or you, or them.’ And what the culture does, then, is make us profoundly alone.”

Tom talked about a blogger he knows who said, “I have 80 thousand readers, but it's been weeks since I had a real conversation with a real live friend. I am both afraid of and desperate for connection.”

John Cassiopo, a neuroscientist from the University of Chicago, believes that we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. He chronicles the physiological consequences of loneliness—and says that when we are lonely, the whole *body* is stressed and lonely.

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It's not certain this epidemic is really new. These sources are all writing in the twenty-first century. But I was first alerted to the loneliness in my congregation by a woman from the last century, who died in 1997. Her work among the poor was so winsome that people constantly asked if they could come and work with her in Calcutta. Mother Teresa acknowledged that the poverty of the West is not as extreme as India's, but she insisted that there was a deficit in our own communities that needed us to make it up. She said, "Loneliness is the scourge of the West."

The truth is that we *are* both afraid of and desperate for connection.

I suspect that combination, that push-pull, was a big part of what led me, as a young man, to want to be a rock star. Still not grown out of my high school sense of freedom, I was in it for *me*. And charisma, limited talent, and a lack of self-awareness are a deadly combination. I've always thought that, if I'd ever really been successful at performing, I'd have died of an overdose or desperate loneliness or both. What I was pretty good at was getting people to pay attention... to me. And as an ultimate goal, that leaves one finally bereft, alone. Fred Craddock once wrote, "The day of your greatest triumph is empty unless you have an altar to place it on." I lacked such an altar.

Now, even though getting people to pay attention is still part of my work, I believe that *emptiness* is what I was saved from in being asked to serve Christ. The difference between "doing what we want" and doing for Someone Else is the difference between servitude and freedom.

The freedom promised in Galatians, the definition of freedom, is very different from John Stuart Mill's. Being *sovereign over our lives* is what Jesus came to save us *from*; he came to liberate us from the burden of being sovereign over ourselves.

And Paul describes that liberation quite clearly: *do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*

That freedom creates a relationship of trust. "Doing what we want" is a curse. I'm certain it would have killed me if I'd gotten "what I wanted." But, paradoxically, being *slaves* to one another is liberation. In author David Foster Wallace's commencement address at Kenyon College he reminded seniors that true "freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day."² Those relationships of trust are genuine freedom.

When we are freed from "doing what we want," the world opens up. Then our love for neighbor can free us to be connected to, care for, and sacrifice for every neighbor: for the sweat shops that make our clothes and shoes; for those affected by our speeding or texting-and-driving. Freed from our self-preoccupation, we can be found in community. We can discover ourselves woven *together* in God's love for the world.

² David Foster Wallace, Commencement address at Kenyon College, 2005, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI>

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Fred Craddock used to tell a story about his sister, who cheated at hide and seek. She would cheat all the time; when she was “it,” she’d count, “One, two, three, four, ninety-five, ninety-six...” But he had this dark place under the steps of the porch. He was so small that he could get under there, and he knew she’d never find him. “...one hundred. Ready or not . . .” and here she came: in the house, out of the house, upstairs, downstairs, in the barn, in the corn. She couldn’t find him. He almost gave himself away, snickering under there: “She’ll never find me here. She’ll never find me here.” Then, it occurred to him: *She’ll never find me here*. So after a while, he would stick out a toe. When she came by and saw the toe, she’d say, “Ah! Got you—I see you—ha, ha! You’re it!” Fred would come out, brushing himself off and saying, “Shoot! You found me.”

What did that young person Fred want? What did he really want? What every child, what every lonely one of us wants....³

I’m glad, when I turned off from the rock star route, somebody saw my toe. The freedom promised in Galatians—*For freedom Christ has set us free*—is a freedom that does not leave us hiding under the stairs alone. It is a freedom wherein we are connected, wherein we belong to one another. It’s a freedom defined by love.

There are days for all of us, I’m sure, when following Jesus with all the other people who are following Jesus is just hard. Well, we know—community is counter-cultural. We don’t belong to one another because we chose it. We don’t belong to one another, because we’re good at it, because we’re virtuous or have the right social agenda. We belong to one another because Christ freed us to belong to one another, to be together.

Together. Especially in *our* time, “together” requires intentionality to live in contrast to the culture’s expectations. It may not feel as natural or comfortable as perhaps it once did, but it is our call. And when we *are* together, when we *are*, we can see the toes of our little brother sticking out from beneath the porch, and somebody sees our toes, and *together* we can push back the loneliness. Because we belong... *together*. That’s the word that John Westerhof and Sherrill Vore have taught us.

That is the freedom into which we are called by the love of God, freed from ourselves alone and made a community *together*.

³ Adapted from Fred B. Craddock, Mike Graves, and Richard E. Ward, eds., *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press: 2001), pp. 34-35.