

Phantom Chains

Colossians 2:16-23

Rev. Lorie Sprinkle ~ April 30, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹⁶Therefore, do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food or drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or Sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the body belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, initiatory visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and tendons, grows with a growth that is from God.

²⁰If with Christ you died to the elemental principles of the world, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ²¹“Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? ²²All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. ²³These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility, and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence.
(Colossians 2:16-23, NRSV)



Prayer for Illumination: Guide us O God by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

Every country has its cultural traditions. For Bulgaria, one of those traditions has been dancing bears. Beginning in the Middle Ages, the craft of training bears to dance was passed down from generation to generation. The trainers would stand on street corners with their dancing bears, to the delight of those passing by.

The problem was, bears don't dance naturally, at least not in front of people. So, in order to get a bear to dance, you had to buy a baby bear from a zoo, raise it in captivity, put a big brass ring through its nose, chain it to the ground and use cruel methods to get it to bounce around on its feet.

So, some years ago, dancing bears were outlawed in Bulgaria. But, there was a problem. What do you do

with a former dancing bear? You can't simply release it into the wild. It won't survive.

Fortunately, bear sanctuaries were created to take care of these poor creatures. Ron and I visited a bear refuge in the mountains of Bulgaria a few years ago. There were expansive areas fenced off, and between those areas, pathways where people could walk and look at the bears through the chain link fences.

One bear we saw had recently been rescued from captivity. The bear stared at us through the fence, pacing back and forth, about 20 feet each direction. Back and forth, back and forth, staring sadly at us through the fence.

The thing was, the bear was no longer attached to a chain. The nose ring was gone. The chain was gone. And behind him beckoned a vast forest full of trees to climb and logs to scratch and a wonderful open expanse to romp in. But instead of enjoying his new surroundings, he simply paced back and forth, back and forth, the distance of his former chain.

We learned that bears commonly do that upon their release. The captivity and the chains that constrained them are so fixed in their brains that even though they are free, they act as though they are still in chains. And it takes a long time for them to realize that they can go wherever they want to go in their new home.

The bear was free, but still he paced, constrained by his phantom chains.

As Paul writes to the believers in Colossae, he warns them against being constrained by chains that don't exist. “If with Christ you have died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?”

N. T. Wright explains a bit about the world of those early believers in Colossae, and the various forces that they were up against. Colossae, as with most towns in Central Asia, was primarily pagan. The people worshiped lots of gods, including many local gods. These gods were considered to be part of the community. So, in the town, there were residents that were visible, and residents that were not. And it was

important to keep these local gods, these invisible residents, happy, lest they cause bad things to happen to the community, like a drought or a pestilence.

If something bad did happen, the priests would look for someone to blame. So if you weren't at the latest pagan festival or sacrifice, you were suspect. And back then, religious life was done out in the open, there was no such thing as a private religious life, so everyone knew where everyone else stood. Which was why it was often the early Christians who took the blame for displeasing the gods and were punished for it.

It was dangerous to go against the pagan religions. It was dangerous to claim Jesus as the only God worthy of your worship. So there was intense pressure on the believers in Colossae to conform to the religious practices surrounding them.

At the same time, there was a Jewish community there, which had its own set of religious practices and regulations. So there was pressure on the believers to conform to Judaism as well.

They were caught between these two forces – paganism on the one hand and Judaism on the other, both insisting that they abide by their rules. Both sides telling the early believers how they should live their lives.

Paul admonishes them. The Message reads, “Don't tolerate people who try to run your life.” All of those requirements and expectations are but a shadow (*skia*) of the real thing. The true substance belongs to Christ alone.

The term Paul uses for that which is really real is *soma*, literally, body. Christ is the Head. We are the body. And just as every part of the body is totally dependent on the head, so we are dependent on Christ. We can no more function apart from Him than my arm can function apart from my body.

Paul says, if Christ alone is the real thing, don't waste your time and energy on things that don't really matter in the end. All those made up rules and regulations, those expectations and pressures are nothing but smoke and mirrors.

No generation is completely free from cultural and social influences and pressures. But when I look around at the world we live in, it is remarkable how intense those pressures can be.

If you're a Baby Boomer or older, you might remember a day, when if a boy wanted to take a girl to the prom,

he said, “Do you want to go to the prom with me?” Not anymore. If a young man wanted to propose to a young woman, he got down on one knee, held out a ring and asked, “Will you marry me?” Not anymore. If a couple learned the gender of their unborn child, they might tell a few close friends. Now they're expected to have a huge blowout gender reveal party. Every event in life, it seems, is now supposed to be so amazing and Instagram-worthy that if you don't do it right, then you simply don't measure up.

And even if you say you don't care, how long do *you* wait after you've posted something on Facebook or whatever platform you use, to see if anyone responded? And honestly, how does it feel when you get a thumbs up or a thumbs down?

There is intense social pressure to project a public image of success and beauty and wealth to demonstrate that you are “livin' the dream.” Is it any wonder that depression, anxiety, loneliness and suicide are at epidemic levels, especially among adolescent girls, and that we are in the midst of a mental health crisis in this country?

The pressure to perform is so great that it can begin to feel as if all of life is lived on a stage and that we are constantly being judged on our performance. Like so many dancing bears, we hop around, trying to please others, desperately hoping for approval.

The pressure to perform comes from so many directions. It comes from friends and colleagues and family and classmates. It is so pervasive in our culture that we don't even notice it – it's the water that we swim in, the air that we breathe.

I might hear about this one later, but one of the social pressures I observe is on parents, especially those with younger children, to project this image of the perfect nuclear family. So everything revolves around the nuclear family – activities, holidays, trips, weekends, to demonstrate how happy they are, often to the exclusion of the very people best equipped to bring them the deepest connections and joy.

I see intense pressure from the culture wars that divide this weird political/religious landscape that we live in. The expectation is; that if you are a good Republican, or a good Democrat, you will embrace certain agendas, you will reject other agendas, you will think and act and vote in particular ways. And if you deviate from those ways, you are no longer regarded as faithful to the party.

And with the current melding of media and politics, people devote themselves to those sources of information that confirm their already-held beliefs, lest they become uncomfortable with conflicting information and views. Like the bears of Bulgaria, we are stuck pacing back and forth, back and forth in our own political/religious ruts.

One of the reasons, I think that we get stuck is our need for approval. It's a natural need, think of the child longing for his parent's words, "well done." So we do our little dance in front of whomever we deem most import in our lives, looking for that nod of approval. But, whatever we receive from others is like the mist. Here one moment and gone the next.

It's also fear, I think, that keeps us stuck. Not only fear of being disliked or disapproved of, but fear of the unknown, and fear of failure. This fear is a heavy chain that reduces our joy, that limits our experiences, that dampens our relationships and that keeps us stuck. "Do not let anyone condemn you," Paul says. All these things have the appearance of wisdom, but they mean nothing in the end.

If only we could truly understand that the brass ring in our nose is gone. The chains are broken. As we heard last week, all those things that have held us captive – our sin and shame, our inadequacies and imperfections were nailed to the cross. We are made new. We are set free to live into the fullness of life.

So let us BE who we ARE. Beloved children of the everlasting God. Princes and princesses of the King of Glory. That is not something we flaunt with pride, but rather, in humility we seek to live in devotion to God. Because to be free in Christ does NOT mean that we get to do anything we want to. Instead, as Tim Keller says, "... freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions."

So, for instance, when we stop living to please other people we have to stop playing games. We have to respond to that difficult email or text when it would be easier to pretend that we never received it. We have to express our anger in healthy ways rather than being passive-aggressive. We have to be wise and even-handed in the midst of conflict, we have to say and do hard things. Because that's what Jesus would do.

We recently started watching the TV series, *The Crown*. Yes, the one that first aired in 2016. We're a little behind the times. And you can't take this analogy too far, but one of the things that has struck me about the young Queen Elizabeth was her understanding that her identity as the Queen was bigger than she was. At

times, it took great wisdom and courage. But she was willing to give up her own desires in order to fulfill her duties as the Queen of Great Britain.

Living in the freedom and fullness of Christ is bigger than we are. It requires us to step outside our comfort zones so that we can speak the truth in love, we can seek to heal divisions we see around us, we can work to resolve conflict instead of sweeping it under the rug. We can reach out in love those around us even if don't really like them. We can take risks, and when we fail, we can pick ourselves up and keep on going. We can live life large. And we can only do it by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us.

Ron and I are skiers, and over the years we have taken the occasional ski lesson to improve our skills. When you ski, your weight is on the downhill ski. Then when you turn, you shift your weight from one foot to the other in the middle of the turn, so that now, your weight is on the other foot, which is now the downhill ski. The tendency, when skiers turn, is to shift that weight too quickly, which ends in sharp turns instead of smooth ones.

We were working on smoothing out our turns. The instructor explained that the way to do that was that, at that brief moment in the turn when both ski tips are pointed directly down the fall line, downhill, you need to have all your weight forward, over the tips of the skis, before you shift your weight to the other foot and complete the turn. You have to "dive into danger," as you throw your body weight straight down the mountain.

Now, if you have any sense of self-preservation, you realize that "diving into danger" does not come naturally. You have to go against your natural inclination to play it safe. Living as those set free from the phantom chains of our world requires us to dive into danger. To trust in the goodness of God as we live boldly for Him.

Like those early believers in Colossae, we are tempted to do a little dance to gain the approval of those around us. However, the only one in whom we can find full and complete approval is Christ. And he is the only one whose opinion of us really matters, anyway.

Because it is in Christ alone that our hope is found. He is our light, our strength, our song. He is our cornerstone, our solid ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm. What heights of love, what depths of peace, when fears are stilled, when strivings cease; he is our Comforter, our All in All, and so here in the love of Christ we stand. And in that love, we are set free.

Dr. Dan Siegel is a clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA medical school. He studies the interaction of the mind and body as well as the neuropsychology of relationships. He has a meditation that I sometimes use during my quiet times. I think it gives a good description of what it looks like to live as free people, to flourish the way God intends us to. I think of it as a blessing and a prayer. And I'd like to end with us reading this blessing together. I have changed it slightly to fit this context:

May all of us be happy; with lives of meaning, connection and equanimity and with grateful, playful and joyful hearts.

May all of us be healthy, with bodies that give energy and flexibility, strength and stability.

May all of us be safe and secure and free from internal and external threats.

May all of us flourish and thrive with the ease of well-being.

And it seems only natural to me to follow this blessing with the prayer that Jesus taught us:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Colossians 2:16-23 again. What stands out to you?
2. What do you see as some of the influences/forces that most impact our society today? Which of those impact you the most?
3. What do you observe about social media's impact on society? In what ways does it bring freedom? In what ways does it enslave?
4. Take a deep breath. In what ways do you think that the culture wars impact our society? How do they impact the Church? How do they impact you personally?

5. Imagine a person who is truly set free from social constraints, who lives their life entirely devoted to Jesus. Describe what that person would be like.
6. Tim Keller says, "freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions." Describe some liberating restrictions.
7. It takes courage to live solely for Christ, not dependent on the approval of others. It requires us to love deeply, to live boldly, to go against the tide when necessary. To live this way, we need to "dive into danger," doing those things that are necessary but hard. How might you "dive into danger" this week?

Table to Table

A question for kids and adults to answer together

In what ways do you feel like you need to please your classmates, friends and family?