

The Freedom to Be!

Shepherd's Grace Church

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²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3: 23-29)

Last week we began a 4 week series studying the letter Paul wrote to the Galatians. In this study we are going to examine Paul's convictions regarding freedom. I believe Paul outlines at great length the freedom God gives us and the ways in which God intends us to use it. Freedom is not an absence of restriction, it is rather a willingness to apply discipline to our lives as we live in relationship with others. We defined freedom last week as The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint. Because as we learn in Genesis 1 that God created us in His image and likeness we can claim this freedom as an inalienable right. The struggle however comes in understanding that we live not separately from others but in community. Over the years, we have come to believe that we have the right to act, think, and speak however we choose as an individual right but the reality is that this was never God's intention. If we go on to read Genesis 1: 26-29 we find that God does indeed create us in God's own image and God creates us male and female in his image and likeness. Intentionally God creates us with differences!

While we all have the freedom to act, think, and speak our own minds, in community we have the responsibility to allow the same actions from others who were intentionally created differently from us. God's very action in creation insured that we would have different opinions, different thoughts, and different points of view regarding our lives together. These differences, however, were not intended to be divisive but to be inclusive. It is for this reason that in the Book of Leviticus we are commanded to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. The restraint that we willingly place on our own individual freedom comes from the love we have for others and the recognition that all others have the same inalienable right to express their thoughts and actions that we do!

Freedom is not our own exclusive claim in God! It is instead our challenge to transcend community and become communion! Community invites every one. There are no restrictions. Here in Arkansas City we do not have a fence around our boundary. All are allowed in. People who look the same as we do, people who think the same as we do, and people who look and think differently than we do are all allowed in and are all encouraged to be involved because we recognize in our freedom the inherent freedom of others! This mixing of our ideas and gifts with the ideas and gifts of others should not cause division, but rather unity. Communion is this union. It is the celebration of differences coming together

to become even stronger in their love and respect for one another! The purpose of exploring Paul's letter to the Galatians is to begin to understand freedom in this unity.

Last week, we outlined the areas of freedom we would cover in the next several weeks. These topics are not intended to be exhaustive of all Paul has to say. They are intended instead to cause us to act, think, and speak in ways that recognize and respect the God given freedom we so deeply enjoy. Last week we talked about the freedom we have to Imagine. In Paul's letter chapter two he says, "Now it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me!" This presence of Christ living in us gives us a freedom to imagine a life different from the one the world commands us to live. In Christ, we are not bound to the expectations of the world, instead we are free to live in God's grace. We do not have to live condemned by our sins or even by our mistakes, but we can move on in the knowledge that once and for all time, Christ's work on the cross overcame all our doubts, all our fears, all our shortcomings and allows us to truly die to our old selves and become new in Christ. Imagine the freedom this gives a person, but do not stop there! Imagine the freedom this gives a community. We no longer have to judge our neighbors thoughts and actions. We are free to live according to the will, plan and Word of God!

This week we will look at the *Freedom to Be!* "To be, or not to be, that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take arms against a sea of troubles." This quote from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* invites us into the very point Paul is trying to make this week. Here in the 21st century it is easy to miss Paul's point entirely. In our time we spend much of our time thinking about becoming and not about being. Think about your life. Think about all the social, political, economic pressure that exists around you. Forget that, think about where you are right now and the pressure that your religion, your church places on you. All of these pressures place you not in a position of being, but of becoming!

As I look daily at the facebook posts on my page I am continually amazed at the frequency of the comment "I'm bored." It seems as if the phrase comes up in some form or another in one out of every 5 posts or so. People don't always say, I'm bored, but they will say, "what is everyone doing?" or "hit me up for a truth" which is just another way of saying I don't like just being here. I need to move somewhere else in my brain or in my thoughts or in my immediate interaction. I don't like just sitting here and being, I must become engaged in something else even if it is not productive or helpful or even enjoyable. I need to become something other than just the person sitting here right now!

We are in the middle of summer now. The kids have been out of school long enough now to have run out of the excitement and novelty of being out of school. They are bored! They are discontent at just being at home, or at weights or at basketball practice or at a friend's house. They are looking for something different! They do not want to be where they are, they want to become something else. They want to have a transformation in their social lives so they can feel like they are moving into a more stimulating point in their lives!

We have an easy time pointing fingers at the kids in this regard don't we? It is easy to chastise them for being so impatient, but aren't we much the same. We get to the restaurant and we are impatient when

the service is slow. We are in such a hurry to gobble down our food that we don't take time to enjoy the tastes. We do not enjoy the atmosphere of the restaurant because we are on a deadline to get to the movie where we then complain that the ticket line is too long and doesn't move fast enough even though the movie doesn't start until 30 minutes after we have been seated! Socially, we are not content to be.

We do not like to take our time. We do not want to look around and enjoy the sights and sounds of the situation we find ourselves in. We want to become something else even when we have the freedom, the time, the means to be.

Economically we are no different. We look at the resources we have and instead of being thankful for what has been provided for us through our labors we want more. We are willing to spend what we will have next month on what we want this month because we are not satisfied with what we have now. I do not want to say that we shouldn't aspire to more or even chase a dream of more, but as we listen to Paul this morning we should recognize the freedom God gives us in what we do have.

We are no longer slaves to our desires or our wants. Instead, in Christ we are privileged to be free. We belong to a Kingdom where through God's grace our sins have been forgiven, our future is assured and in that Kingdom, we should pause to just be and to give thanks for the precious gift of life God invites us into.

Politically, we look around at the injustice of the world. We want to live in a world where there is total justice. God tells us after all in the book of Amos that we are to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God! That calls for change doesn't it? That calls for becoming! We should not be satisfied until all are free! However in our earnest to create the change we do not take the time to realize what we have!

Before Christ we were prisoners to the law! We were slaves to rules and regulations. Our efforts to change the world politically come by reverting back to the law. We want to continue to make rules and regulations regarding the sanctity of life, regarding the expression of sexuality, regarding the rights of people to live in a free and open society. We fail to recognize that these rules which we intend as freedoms enslave us to a system that is perpetrated by humans. This system can never allow us to be free! This system can never allow us to be; to be brothers and sisters in Christ, to be free and willing servants of God our creator! In our effort to become a society that holds the truths of God as self-evident we have legislated our own morality and we have legislated out Gods!

Before faith came we were prisoners to the law! In faith we have the opportunity to be. In faith we have the freedom to be! In faith we can recognize in others the same rights and freedoms we claim for ourselves. In faith we can recognize that the differences of others offer opportunities to create a stronger self.

From the very beginning of our created being, God intended us to be different. He created us in His image and in His likeness as male and female so that our differences would be complimentary and not confrontational. As humans we have developed such an ego that we believe when we look at others

and see differences we need to create labels for them ; labels which serve to identify differences, labels which serve to separate ideologies, labels which serve to segregate segments of society one from another and under the law we seek to enforce these segregations. We use the law as our disciplinarian and we want the law to protect us from one another when God does not desire that we receive that protection.

God does not want us to gather only as those who look like everyone around us! God does not want us to gather only as those who believe as those around us! God does not want us to support the rights of those who believe only as we do! Politically we have been created as those who hold these truths to be self evident; that all people are created equal, that all people are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness! It is not the law that gives these rights but the Creator who gives them.

It is not the law that allows us to pursue our hopes, it is our Creator! It is not the law that encourages us to come to the moment of difference and listen to one another, it is our Creator! Our Creator, in infinite wisdom created us differently so that we could be support for one another in difficult times, so that we could imagine different possibilities together, so that we could recognize other options in our lives than the ones we could conceive of by ourselves. In our desire to become, we forget the that by being ourselves in freedom we have the opportunity to grow together.

God created us male and female not to live apart but to live together, to be together and to have the freedom to be who we are recognizing in our being that our differences are our greatest strengths. For generations, men have forgotten that. We have claimed that we had the answers and we have dominated and oppressed others because we perceived them as weaker. In the current generation women have asserted their strength and have claimed their superiority in many areas to attempt to claim the power that men have held on to for so many years! Both male and female have failed to recognize that we are intended to be different no so that one group can have superiority over another but so that we can be the image of God for one another!

God never intended that we would be alone in our world. God intends that we should be together and work together, and live together, and laugh together and love together not under the discipline of the law, but in the freedom of Christ! In Christ there is no more male or female, there is no more slave nor free, there is no more nationality or race! All are one in Jesus!

In Sunday School today with the kids I asked them to pair off and look at each other. Then I asked them to close their eyes and describe one another. I asked about color of hair. I asked about color of shirts and pants and shoes and socks and eyes. They gave answers as best as they could and then they opened their eyes to discover that they hadn't looked very carefully at their partner after all.

Very often we see other people only casually. We see them for what we expect them to be, and not what they are because we see them becoming what we want them to be. It seems to be human nature to want others to become like we are. We want them to look like us, to talk like us, to think like us, to have sex like us! After all, we have all the answers because it is us that are created in God's image! What we fail to recognize is that God created us; male and female God created us! In his image and

likeness God created us, each of us different from the other God created us so that we might look at one another and see, not what we want to see but to see the power of our differences coming together to work, to live, to laugh and to love!

After the group in Sunday School had finished looking at each other and realizing just how little they see in one another I had them close their eyes again. I had them look at one of their group and together describe that one. While their eyes were closed I put a large picture of Jesus in front of that one. After they had finished painting their picture, I asked them to open their eyes. When they looked again, they saw Jesus! God created us different from one another so that we could be Jesus for one another! In 1John 4 scripture tells us that we are Jesus in this world. We look different from one another because Jesus looks different from us.

Jesus is not law for us. Jesus is faith for us! In Him we can live and move and have our being in this moment and not in the future. In Jesus we are able to wait, to watch and to wonder at all God is accomplishing in our world. Before faith came we had need of the law as our discipline. No that faith is present in Jesus we can live differently! We can live in freedom to trust God's love for us because we can see that through our differences God has given us something more precious than we could have ever imagined! God has given us Grace, the grace of His only Son!

In His grace we do not have to separate ourselves from one another. We do not have to look for differences and point them out as flaws. We do not have to reject one another but we can respond to one another as we see Christ in each other. We are no longer different but we are one in Him!

We struggle with this in the church as well! We want our worship time to be free of all controversy and conflict. We want everything to be nice and neat and clean. We become uncomfortable when the preacher starts to talk about sin because we start to recognize our shortcomings. We do not like to have it pointed out that we have failed to live into the law as it has been given to us. Most of us are ok when we talk about the sin of others, but when the preacher starts to hit close to our shortcomings we start to squirm a little. We are willing to let the law convict us. We are willing to let the law as we perceive it discipline us.

God invites us into a different understanding this morning. God invites us not to be convicted by the law. Paul does not say that civil law needs to be put aside but he is saying that religious law needs to be reexamined! There should be no rules that keep us from coming together to worship our God. All people, regardless of their sin should be made to feel welcome because it is not the law that defines our relationship with God but rather our faith in Jesus Christ!

As we come to worship we should remember that we are not here to set rules but to recognize the one who is different from us and to be in His presence. When we try to define who is welcome and who is not, we have eliminated ourselves because all of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God! As we come to worship we should remember that it is only by the work of Christ on the cross that we are even able to live and move and have being! His grace gives us the courage, the confidence to come before God and offer the praise that is due him! His grace and not our goodness! His grace and not our work. His grace and not our law!

We are no longer slave nor free, we are no longer Jew nor Gentile, we are no longer male nor female but we all belong to Christ Jesus and are one in him. We are one in Him! We are not becoming one, but we are one and we are free in Him to be that one. We are perfected not in our work but in Him and in him alone and because of that we are children of Abraham.

Abraham grew in his faith. He was not perfect in it at the beginning but in his willingness to continue to stand with God he became perfected. He became heir to God's promise not because he worked at it perfectly. Abraham stumbled and fell and turned away from God many times in Genesis 12-16 but as he recognized his own weakness he turned back to God and was justified not by his works but by his faith!

In the end he won favor with God because of his willingness to be who he was. He walked out into the night and looked up at the stars in the sky and listened to the waves pounding against the sands of the seashore and he heard God's promise to him not as who he was becoming but as who he was in that moment.

Today, God invites us into that freedom to be! Today God invites us, regardless of what we look like or the social or economic or even religious conviction of our selves to be in Him. God invites us to understand that we are all together as different human beings because that is the way He created us and that our differences are our greatest strength is we are willing to be in those differences.

We do not require the discipline of the law! WE require the discipline of love that comes from one willing to come as our faith and as our redemption. Today, we are invited to be. Today we are invited to be one! Today we are invited to be one in Christ Jesus for it is to Him that we belong!

Amen!