

## Galatians 5:1,13-25

### Freedom

The word “freedom” gets tossed around a lot today. I think the most striking and recent example of this would have been as we watched the “freedom convoy” cross Canada and occupy the streets of Ottawa in the area around the Parliament buildings. The word freedom was chanted over and over again. Depending upon your feelings around this you might have felt it an affirmation of your understanding of what that means to be free or it may have felt more like an intimidation chant meant to bring fear and division.

Christians were divided as to what freedom in the context of the pandemic meant and this division continues in our faith and in our families. Governments are seen by groups of people, both here in Canada and elsewhere in the world, as those robbing people of their freedoms. And there is much to be said about how we are governed. Power, no matter who has the power, is often corrupted, and there are examples of that in every age.

This message is not intended to judge activism or understanding when people are at odds or in disagreement, but to place our focus on what is meant when we speak about freedom as Christians. How do we discern when we are living freely, as people who pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven?

The Apostle Paul, in writing the letter to the Galatians, has something to say to us about that. Now a little context can be helpful. Paul is writing to a community that is in crisis. It might not seem like a big deal, but after Paul left them to continue his ministry in other communities, people with ideas about requirements to be an even better Christian, to have more physical signs of being a good Christian, had come and were perverting the gospel that Paul had preached in which there would be no second-class citizens. All people were free in Christ because of what God had done, not because of anything the individual or community of faith might do to earn more credibility or clout.

At this point in the letter, Paul is setting before people two ways of life, and “they are contrary to each other, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day.” (v 16-18)

The challenge is between a law-dominated existence and freedom. Examples of this kind of law-dominated existence are self-focused, it leads to “divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community” (v19-21) and this is only a part of the troubles.

In the conversations that have been a part of our Canadian context over the last two years, there has been a lot of talk and division between people, and it has been most painful to see in how Christians have used the Christian faith to make their points or to somehow say this is how things should be.

But as Christians we should be the first to listen to try to understand why someone is reacting or choosing as they are. I can't help but hear the line from the familiar hymn, "they'll know we are Christians by our love" and think, but what love are we demonstrating as Christians to a world that is already so divided and hurting, when so many Christians are quick to use their faith as the grounds for which to dismiss the thoughts, actions, and life of others?

Christ's love was sacrificial to the point of death. Can we not at least sacrifice for one another so that people live free of condemnation, judgement, and fear? This conversation played out in the context of such things as opposition to government mandates, but extends to our conversations around truth and reconciliation with our Indigenous communities, with the LGBTQI2S+ families, and into things beyond our borders, like giving aid to countries and helping refugees find hope and life without fear in our own country.

How do we live into our Christian freedom in all of these contexts and conversations, claiming that freedom for ourselves as well as extending it in love to others? As Eugene Peterson in *The Message* questions and then answers, "But what happens when we live God's way? [God] brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. "(v22-23)<sup>1</sup>

Carla Works, in her commentary, says it this way, "So how will the Galatians know that they are indeed a people being transformed—a people of the promise, children of God, clothed in Christ? Because they are a people who bear one another's burdens, love one another, as Christ has loved them. They are a people whose actions are marked by the shape of the cross rather than their own selfish desires. They are fulfilling the intention of the law—to love their neighbors."<sup>2</sup>

In an age where people are self-centered and self-focused, the living into this freedom will seem alien and contrary to everything that society and culture says we have a right

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<sup>1</sup> **The Message (MSG)** Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Carla Works. Commentary on Galatians 5:1, 13-25 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)  
Accessed June 24, 2022

to. This does not mean that we dismiss conflict or neglect to attend to justice, but it does mean that we do not look at it from the perspective of personal gain. Being able to struggle with questions and conversations in a safe and vulnerable way is important. Personal attacks or even generalized attacks on those who believe or behave differently than we think is “Christian” or otherwise, does not have a place in Christian discourse because then we cannot be vulnerable to one another.

Vulnerable Christian community, not limited to our own church but in the broadest sense of Christian community, means feeling safe enough to share our hopes and understandings, but with full regard for another’s humanity, safety, and security. Taking into account the needs of the most vulnerable among us, making sure their needs are met first. It doesn’t matter if you think they are deserving of such care, our faith demands it of us. We are not the judge, we are the vessels that Christ’s uses so that love can flow out from us as individuals and as Christian community, into the streets of our town, cities, highways, and places of government.

And, “Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” (v25-26).

May we know that the Spirit goes with us, as guide, as wisdom, as counselor and reminder of all Christ said and did in his life. All this we access through prayer, worship, study of scripture, through conversation and in community.

Freely live in the Spirit of Jesus, as we grow in understanding, knowledge, wisdom, and faith, loving others into wholeness and inclusion. Amen.