

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

Freedom

For freedom Christ has set us free.

What do you think of when you hear the word freedom?

My gut reaction when I hear that is slowly freedoms are being eroded. I come from Dutch immigrants who lived through WWII as children. I still remember the stories of oppression I heard. Stories of the Dutch underground, the daily fear of those who were a part of that. I heard about my grandfather who would take food into the city in order that people who were hungry might have food. I heard of the day liberation came to my mom's small village and the joy at pulling out the radio from its hiding place to hear the news of freedom.

When I think of freedom, I give thanks that I live in Canada and once rejoiced that all of North America was a place of freedom. I have been annoyed by the way the word freedom has been conscripted for things like the Freedom Convoy which took over Ottawa and took away the freedom of those who lived and worked near the parliament buildings or blocked border crossings. I struggle with what is going on in the U.S. as people are rounded up and not given due process, the constitution blatantly disregarded, and a president who wants to be a dictator. And not to just look there, but around the world where people are being oppressed, with our own country continuing practices that disregard the hopes and dream, needs and desires of Indigenous people.

As it happens freedom is a tenuous thing. It is so because it happens by choice. Freedom is the right to choose. And we can choose things that are selfish and indulgent or we can choose to love. That basically sums up what the Apostle Paul is saying. He adds a litany of things that are the result of choosing a self-indulgent life and a list of things that are the result of choosing a life of love.

Things that are self indulgent are for our own gratification. These things do not concern themselves with how our choices impact other people. You can take a look at the list. At first you might think, well these don't apply. Which of us sitting here are into sorcery, or sexual behavior or conduct that is crude and offensive, which is the definition of licentious behavior. However I do not think that even some of us here have not had moment where these things may have or are a part of our experience. We think that we are not idolaters and yet the almighty dollar has a great effect on how we think and behave. And then if one has continued to pay attention and not glazed over as the list is read, you get to strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, and as Paul concludes, things like these. I would like to see anyone who has lived so purely

that these things have not been a problem at some point in a life. To top it off, this is not a comprehensive list. There are more things that we people do that put us above all else.

Paul says that these things take away our freedom. One might think that because you can choose these things you are free, but if you truly examine how these behaviours effect a person and those around them then one might see how these “choices” are burdensome, oppressive, and give power of one over and against the other.

All these things gratify the flesh. Now don't think of this as body bad - spirit good. This is about how our choices affect our bodies, minds, and spirit, how these things strip us of our dignity and the strip others of theirs. Paul restates what Jesus taught, “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

There is another choice. One that is life-giving and it seems counterintuitive. Love others. Somehow by choosing to love others we ourselves choose life. When we live by the Spirit of God, we find that we can live into the second list that Paul gives. The first list causes division and factions, life lived in that way is chaotic, careless, and cruel. The second list is so unifying that it creates one fruit of the Spirit. These things are so intertwined that they create unity even in themselves. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – there is no law against such things because they are life-giving, even life-transforming.

If you are living in the Spirit, you find that you cannot be loving without also being peaceful, patient, kind, and generous. The choice one makes when choosing life in and with the Spirit is a choice that not only brings joy to you but if you are living life in this way, you will definitely make an impact on everyone around you.

Now, there is a caveat. Living in the Spirit does not mean that you don't stand up for anything. What it means is that you recognize that your power is meant to bring life to everyone and anyone. You choose to love, to be angry when injustice to those who are most vulnerable is witnessed. It is about freedom for everyone knowing that freedom for everyone means that they are as worthy as you to be loved, cared for compassionately, supported physically, emotionally, spiritually, and socially.

Morgen Freeman hosted a docu series called, *The Story of Us*, and one of the episodes was called *The March of Freedom*. It was full of examples of what freedom means. Stories were told by people who had experienced the opposite of freedom. One woman spoke about the genocide of the Mayan people in Guatemala. Her whole family had been taken from her one by one, and brutally tortured and murdered over the course of a few years...mom, dad, and two brothers. There was the story of a man who had escaped the confines of a labour camp in North Korea, one into which he was born, had watched as people were gunned down, had seen a child beaten to death for keeping scrapes of food, a place where his own parents were so deadened that they did not know how to show love to their children. After being told tales about food by

someone who ended up in the camp as a prisoner, he determined to find a way out and he did. Then over the course of ten years he was able to find his way to the U.S. where he now lives and is married with children. There was the transperson who had lived as a boy with his sister and parents in Afghanistan whose parents were murdered and then butchered as the children were hidden. The children then recused only to find themselves being trained to be suicide bombers and then rescued again to be truly freed, but his true freedom only came when he could choose to become a woman.

What so struck me as I listened to each of these stories and others in the documentary, as I thought about the freedom my mother could still make palatable in her story decades after that moment in her village in the Netherlands, about any freedom that I think of, I realized that freedom only comes when or because others make a choice for justice, for compassion, for love. Our choices can make the difference for another. We can choose to stand up against oppression, we can stand up for justice, we can stand up for the least of the people, those most vulnerable.

And this is where a clear distinction needs to be made, as there are many people standing up for their own rights and what is perceived as their rights and freedoms. This is especially important as we watch politicians making decisions and policies being put forth, as we see people in dissension and factions, to the point that our own families are in disagreement. One might wonder, well who has got it right? For the Christian that is not a difficult answer, the living it out may be difficult but the answer is not. Christ came so that all may have life and life abundant. Jesus' whole ministry was spent with those on the margins of life, the poor, the vulnerable, those who had the least to offer. It was to those who were suffering that Jesus brought God's life-giving message. This message is for everyone of us; we are all God's children. Still, the call to love, to justice, and compassion, is given to those of us who have means, even some power over our own autonomy using that power to then lift others out of the muck and mire of life.

And no matter who you are, rich or poor, powerful or powerless, each of us can make the choice to love, to treat others with dignity and bring joy. How we choose to live, our lives, our actions, reveal God's mission of freedom. This is about loving one's neighbour. I was reminded again of a word I have often read about, it is the African word *Ubuntu*, which as I understand is really an untranslatable word for humanness, but roughly means "a person is a person because of other people." Hear that again, "a person is a person because of other people."

Our humanity, our connectedness, our meaning and purpose comes because we are not who we are without each other. So, in order for you to be lifted up, to be safe, to be loved, means that another needs to do that for you and that goes the other way around as well. In order for another to be lifted up, to be safe, to be loved, means that we have to do that for each other. Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in a forward to a book about human rights that, "We are all connected to each other and our behaviour, whether good or bad, reverberates across societies and down the generations."

Today may you consider how to live into the list that is the fruit of the Spirit...love, joy, peace patience, kindness, generosity faithfulness gentleness, and self-control. Know that you don't do it alone. As it is all about our connectedness, our humanity, we do it in community, this community of faith, and in the power of the Holy Spirit at work in, with and through us. Thanks be to God for steadfast power and love. Amen