

“Free to Follow”

Psalm 77:1-2, 11-20; Luke 9:51-64; Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Rev. Dr. Sue Shorb-Sterling

In a few days our nation will be celebrating the 243rd anniversary of the thirteen colonies declaring their desire to be free from Great Britain. Our Declaration of Independence states that liberty or freedom is one of our unalienable rights endowed by our Creator. For Paul, Christ sets us free. What does it mean to be free?

A caged parrot would spend every waking hour of every day crying out, “Freedom, freedom, freedom!” Its owner got tired of hearing the parrot cry out over and over again, “Freedom, freedom, freedom!” The owner thought that the parrot wanted to be free of its cage, so she opened the cage door, reached in for the parrot, and launched the parrot into the air. The next morning when the owner woke up, she heard the parrot still crying out, “Freedom, freedom, freedom!” The owner found the parrot sitting inside the cage with the door open. The parrot had returned to the cage. Freedom was available to the parrot, yet the parrot was too afraid of being free. The parrot preferred the familiarity and safety of its cage.

Paul states that Christ has set us free to live a free life! Christ has opened our cage door for us to live free. Yet, we aren’t sure what that means, so we climb back in the cage where we are comfortable and familiar. Paul doesn’t state, “You are free! Go fly! Live as you wish!” This is not Paul’s definition of freedom. Freedom is not about doing whatever we want to do, or living a care free life. Christ has set us free from the cage that centers around us, that centers around meeting our own wants, that centers around doing only whatever we want to do, and to hell with everyone else! Christ set us free from our cages of selfishness to be placed in God’s greater cage of love where we can see God’s creation through God’s eyes, where we can see people as God sees us. Christ sets us free to love as God loves. The Wesley Covenant prayer states, “My life is no longer my own, but yours,” which means Christ has set us free so we can be bound him for the purpose of serving each other.

How does this freedom compare to the freedoms we enjoy in our nation? In the United States we have the freedom of speech, the freedom of religion, the freedom of the press, and the freedom to peaceably assemble. The freedom of speech gives us the freedom to say whatever we want to say about anyone no matter if it is uplifting or damaging to one’s character. The freedom of religion gives us the freedom to practice any kind of faith including ones that promote hate and harm to others. The freedom of press is the freedom to print or distribute information about any issue or person no matter if it is true. The freedom to assemble is the freedom to gather to promote messages of injustices or messages of hate. Can these freedoms be abused? Yes, but at the same time these freedoms can be used to promote God’s way of love. Christ has set us free to do so. No laws of any nation will ever have the power to override God’s freedom to love. Christians throughout history have lived and are still living in countries where they do not have freedoms, but they are free to love as Christ loves.

I met Stanislav, an ordained Methodist pastor from the Ukraine, when I took doctoral classes in seminary. He shared his story with us. During communism, there was no religious freedom. His mother was a devout Christian who secretly read her Bible every day. She and other Christians met in each other’s homes for worship and encouragement. They had to get a permit to gather in this way. Each time they got a permit they needed to state the reason for the gathering. They would say that it was to celebrate a birthday. They would decorate the gathering room like a birthday party was being celebrated, just in case the police stopped in to check their permit which did happen sometimes. Even though they were not free to worship, they believed that Christ set them free to love. No communist law could stop them from loving their neighbors. This is how they loved others. They shared their limited supplies of food and fuel with neighbors who were struggling and had less. They cared for their elderly and sick neighbors. They listened to the hardships of others offering empathy. They ran errands for neighbors, sometimes at great risk. Because of their love and care for others, their “birthday parties” or secret worship gatherings grew in number despite the fact that every participant could have been arrested, jailed, and tortured for practicing their faith. These Christians were caged by a dictatorship, but Christ set them free from the cages of their selfish, sinful nature to love. These Ukrainian Christians used their freedom in Christ to serve one another in love. Eugene Peterson wrote, “That’s how freedom grows.”

Paul speaks to this caged nature of our selfish, sinful nature vs. our freedom in Christ to love. We read Eugene Peterson's interpretation of this, "For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness." A root of sinful self-interest. Roots are an interesting part of a plant. Without roots a plant can not live. Roots suck up the nourishment that a plant needs to live. And they can become entangled and create runners that sprout new growth. Have you ever tried to weed grass out of a flower bed or a garden? If you are trying to dig the roots out, you will find that the roots travel a great distance with their purpose to take over your garden space. Just one root of sinful self-interest can grow and feed the plant with poison so it can bear the fruit of divisiveness, fighting, hate, anger, jealousy, factions, envy, depersonalizing anyone; bearing fruit that harms both ourselves and others sexually, physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically. Just one root can produce this kind of fruit.

However, if our roots are embedded in God's Spirit, the plant will be transformed to produce a different kind of fruit: love (affection and concern for others), joy (exuberance about life), peace (serenity), kindness (basic holiness permeates things and people), generosity (a sense of compassion of the heart), faithfulness (a willingness to stick with things), gentleness (not forcing our way of life onto another), and self-control (able to marshal and direct our energies wisely). Richard Rohr speaks about this transformation in his book, *The Universal Christ*. "When we speak of Christ, we are speaking of an ever-growing encounter... On the inward journey of the soul, we meet God who interacts with our deepest selves, who grows the person, allowing and forgiving mistakes... God unfolds our personhood from within through a constant increase in freedom—even the freedom to fail. Love cannot happen in any other way. That is why Paul shouts in Galatians, 'For freedom Christ has set us free!'"

Christ has set us free to live a free life. We are to take a stand or stand firm... We are not to use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever we want to do and destroy our freedom. Rather, we are to use our freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Our nation was founded on this Judeo-Christian principle of the freedom to love our neighbor. This is why our nation has the freedom of speech out of concern for the another's opinion. This is why our nation does not have only one religion out of respect for our differences of faith. This is why our nation has the freedom to express one's opinions out of kindness for the other's opinion. This is why our nation has the freedom to assemble as a means of being compassionate for another's cause. Christ has given us the freedom to choose the world of God's of love outside our cage or remain in our cage afraid of our new freedom. On the 243rd anniversary of the birth of our nation, are we truly free to love our neighbors as we love ourselves? Or have we retreated to our cages living out of our selfish desires, protecting what we think is rightfully ours? Are we willing to extend Christ's freedom of love to those who are not citizens of our nation? Or do we know longer adhere to the writing on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

For Jesus, the freedom to love had nothing to do with borders. He crossed over the border from his home in Galilee on his way to Jerusalem into Samaria, a country that was his country's enemy. They were hated because they were racially and religiously impure. Yet, Jesus had one focus and that was to share the radical love of God for humanity, including the hated Samaritans. Some Samaritans rejected Jesus and his disciples. The disciples wanted to destroy them with fire. What kind of followers of Jesus would we be today if Jesus would have said, "Do it! Kill them all! They deserve it for rejecting me!" Violence of any kind is contrary to God's radical love for every human on the planet. Jesus' mission was one of freeing us to love as God loves. Jesus did not care if one was Jewish, Samaritan, or Roman. Jesus does not care if we are American, Guatemalan, Ukrainian, Mexican, Irish, Italian, or from any country. Jesus doesn't care which national flag we pledge our allegiance to. Christ has opened the doors to our cages, has broken down the borders, to set us free to love our neighbors with the Spirit's fruit of joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against this. We are free to follow Jesus who opened our cages to free us to be the fruit of God's Spirit in the world.

Resources: *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol.3* Bartlett & Taylor, ed.; *The Universal Christ* by Richard Rohr

