
The Fruit of Freedom

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 26, 2016 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

We are a society and a culture that loves (and I mean loves) to talk about freedom. And we do it in all manner of ways. We write about freedom; we chant about freedom; we sing about freedom; we have political battles over impingement of freedom; we even have a holiday where the nation takes a day off to celebrate freedom. When I think of freedom, I am reminded of a chant I learned a few years ago at a training day for pastors and leaders in the fight for justice. It goes like this—and feel free to join me: “Freedom. Freedom. Freedom. Freedom. Oh, freedom, freedom, freedom, freedom.” We might just say, “Let freedom ring!”

Our love of freedom and our political insistence on freedom, makes me wonder, what do we even mean by freedom? Of course, we mean many different things when we say freedom. Often we think of freedom as “freedom from” something. Maybe when you just got off your diet, for the first time in 3 or 6 months, you choose to eat whatever you want. You have donuts for breakfast, a bacon cheeseburger with fries for lunch, ice cream for a snack, pasta in heavy cream sauce for dinner, and crème brulee for dessert. And with your stomach quite sick, you sit back and say, “This is freedom!” It’s self-determined freedom from restraint. When you were a teenager, and maybe if you’re a teenager now, you thought freedom was no longer having to follow the rules of your parents. Maybe the first time you stayed out long past whatever your former curfew was, perhaps even all night, and you climbed into bed exhausted, you thought to yourself, “This is freedom!” It’s freedom from another’s will over you. Maybe when you are standing in the cereal aisle, surrounded by a seemingly unlimited number of options for breakfast consumption, you think to yourself, “Now this is freedom!” It’s freedom from limits on the choices you desire to make. Each of these examples speak to an individualized “freedom from” kind of freedom.

Our world is enamored by this kind of personal, individualized freedom—the freedom that is self-determined acts of unrestrained choice. And as a country, we fight tooth and nail to protect this kind of freedom for ourselves and sometimes for others as well. With such a love for freedom, it is no wonder that when our holy scriptures give us a passage that speaks of freedom our ears perk up, we sit up a bit straighter in our chairs, and we pay attention with new interest and vigor to the ancient words before us. Paul writes to the Galatians, “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters...” Perfect! For freedom, we have been set free. We could rip these two verses from their context, make them our rally cry for a fight for individual rights, personal choice, and private decision making. Sound good to you? Anybody ready to make these your life verses for freedom?

Before we get too far down the road of Paul being the apostle of unbound, self-determination, let’s attend closely to our lesson for this morning. The letter to the Galatians is Paul’s lengthy, passionate, heated response to what he learned had been happening among the churches of Galatia. Early in his time as an apostle sharing the message of Jesus, Paul proclaimed the expansiveness of God’s saving work in Jesus to the people of Galatia. And while the Galatians had originally received his teaching as the good news that it was and is, in the time after his proclamation, false teachers had started adding to, and consequently subtracting from, his teaching. In short, the false teachers had insisted, contrary to the teachings of Paul, that the Gentile Christians were subject to the Jewish Law, from circumcision to dietary restrictions, and all things in between for their righteousness sake. In response to these false teachings, Paul writes strongly against this new message to remind the Galatians of the message he proclaimed. As one commentator puts it, his argument throughout the letter is essentially this:

“God has acted dramatically and decisively to free all people from the enslaving powers of Sin and Death through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, and the entry point into this liberation is nothing other than the faithfulness and grace of Jesus. Grace serves as the invitation, the proper credentials, the doorway itself, and the entire structure into which one enters—the new creation is the world itself, marked and defined not by competition, qualification or exclusion, but by grace—pure gift.”¹

Leading up to our passage in Galatians, Paul has used a variety of rhetorical tactics—from allegorical and metaphorical uses of scripture to what basically amounts to shaming—to help the Galatians understand the error of the new ways into which they had been led. He wants them to understand that their righteousness, their justification, their being put in right relationship with God is not from any act they have done or can do, but it is all rooted in the faithfulness of Jesus and his death for them.

With this point clearly made, Paul describes the character and nature of their freedom in Jesus. One important note must be made here. When reading our passage, and all of Galatians, we must keep in mind that Paul understands all humanity as participants in a cosmic battle between God and the powers of sin and death. And this battle has ultimately been won in Jesus’ death and resurrection, even though the final consummation of the victory is yet in the future. In other letters, Paul uses the language of the principalities and powers to talk about that which works against the plans, purposes, and reign of God. In Galatians, and especially in chapter 5, Paul uses the language of the Flesh to speak of that cosmic power which is opposed to God and God’s Spirit. So Paul writes, “Lead your daily life guided by the Spirit, and, in this way, you will not end up carrying out the Impulsive Desire of the Flesh. For the Flesh is actively inclined against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the Flesh.”²

In this cosmic battle, Paul describes again to the Galatians that they have been set free. Yet the freedom of which he writes is of a particular kind. It is Spirit freedom. And freedom in the realm of the Spirit is always freedom for, not simply freedom from. Yes, for Paul, this is a freedom from the enslaving powers of the Flesh. It is a freedom from the powers of sin and death. But, most precisely, it is a freedom for life in the Spirit. Paul says, “For you were called to freedom, sisters and brothers, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.” Paul emphasizes that freedom created by Christ is freedom for the sake of others.

Paul continues by providing a representative list of the effects of the pseudo-freedom of life under the control of the powers of the Flesh. Paul is not offering a litany of vices to avoid. Rather, he is describing the communal effects when people live under the rule of the Flesh. The outcomes of living out the kind of freedom afforded by the Flesh are things like vicious immorality, worship of idols, outbursts of rage, grudging envy, separation into divisive cliques, and strife, just to name a few. Yet, Paul also offers an alternative vision of reality—a picture of common life when Jesus’ Spirit has been set loose among a people. He portrays the characteristic marks of the community of the Spirit, the fruit borne within a community deeply rooted in and nourished by the Spirit of Jesus. Paul describes what is already real when the Spirit is in control because in Jesus the powers of the Flesh have already received their fatal blow. The fruit of freedom in the Spirit that Paul describes is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And there is no law against such things as these. Paul offers two realms with their own forms of so-called freedom, and he concludes saying, “If we live by the Spirit—and we do—let us carry out our daily lives guided by the Spirit.”³

¹ Rev. Dr. Ryan Hansen, “Living by the Spirit: Freedom (With)In Christ,” <http://www.aplainaccount.org/#!Galatians-51-1325/bhul0/57674e110cf242533e7df010>, accessed June 20, 2016.

² Translation from J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 9.

³ Ibid.

Church of Duke Chapel, like Paul to the Galatians, I say to you, for freedom, Christ has set you free. But too often in our world and in our common life together, we've looked for the wrong fruit within a community and called it freedom. We see licentiousness—unbridled lust and desire for more and more and more—and we call it ambition and success. We see strife, dissensions, and factions (even, and maybe especially, within the church), and we call it diversity, the right to our individual opinion, and options from which to choose. We see idolatry—the act of worshiping and giving our allegiance anything that is not God—and we call it freedom of religious expression. We see excessive drunkenness and call it having a good time. We see illicit sexual acts—acts using another for one's own selfish desires—and we call it a revolution of freedom from the moral constraints of others. Because too often we've understood freedom as self-determined acts of unrestrained choice, we see the works and effects of the Flesh's power, and we call it freedom, when in fact, it is more accurately called bondage.

But Church of Duke Chapel, that is not the freedom for which you have been set free. The freedom for which Christ has set you free is freedom for community; it is freedom for others; it is freedom from the slavery of living for yourself; it is the freedom to be bound to one another; it is the freedom to be united in love to our sisters and brothers; it is freedom within Jesus. And this is the fruit of that freedom borne in the Spirit: it is love—that self-sacrificial, Christ-like, giving oneself for another; it is joy—that cheerful gladness that comes when we see, experience, and know Jesus' love and grace carried through our sisters and brothers; it is peace—that Spirit enabled, non-violent, non-coercive, mutual joining with one another across the chasms that divide; it is patience—that endurance in relationship, the longsuffering for good, the steadfastness and perseverance demonstrated in God's loving pursuit of us and God's slowness to avenge our wrongs with wrath; it is kindness—that God-like quality of integrity-filled goodness and grace; it is generosity—that upright and virtuous disposition of abundant giving to others; it is faithfulness—that reliability and trustworthiness rooted in Jesus' obedience to and love for the Father; it is gentleness—that humble-spirited, non-aggressive way of being for and with another; it is self-control—that deep-rooted contentment with life that enables restraint and temperance even when the desire for more abounds. These are the characteristics of the Spirit borne fruit. This is the fruit of the freedom made available in Jesus.

With this wonderful vision of the reality of life in the Spirit in our minds, I should add a word of warning today. The powers opposed to the Spirit will gladly use what is good and right and beautiful for our destruction. In an effort to grasp and hold onto the freedom in Christ that the Spirit creates, we too easily create anew our own set of laws: Laws about right worship, laws about right practice, laws about who can and who cannot proclaim the message of Jesus, laws about right doctrine, laws regarding all manner of things. And these laws that are meant to protect against the effects of the Flesh become tools for enslavement. We all desire concrete practices to give shape to our freedom. And often we seek things like policies and procedures for our life together to create a solid foundation. But let me remind you today, the Spirit is wild and free. The Spirit blows where she will, producing fruit, a fruit that is freedom from all the new laws that become our methods of protection and self-achieved righteousness. So with Paul, I say, "For freedom, Christ has set us free. Therefore, stand firm, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery."

On the other side, there is also room for caution. The Flesh will use the freedom that is good and right and true for an opportunity for self-gratification, self-dependence, self-sufficiency, and self-conceived truth. Remember with Paul and the Galatians that this is not a freedom for the sake of an individual. It is always a freedom for being bound—Paul says, being a slave—to one another in love. The freedom to which you have been set free is a freedom for love—a love whose defining example is Jesus, the one who in life and death gave himself for us. So again with Paul, I say, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the self-indulging deceptions of the Flesh. Rather, through love become slaves to one another."

“What,” you may be asking, “might this freedom look like in the world today? What is an example of the Spirit’s fruit being borne?” My friend is a pastor of a house church in Durham that, instead of having a permanent building, meets in people’s homes around the Triangle. Because a considerable number of the US population calls prison “home,” this church meets for worship at Butner Federal Prison every few months. Occasionally, a group of students and others from the Chapel attend this worship service in the prison. Over the years of worshipping with our brothers at Butner, we’ve heard stories about the ways that the Flesh claims its turf in the prison. Division and hatred are prevalent both in relation to personal sin and communal sin. There is no better picture of this than the way our prison church brothers have described the tables in the dining hall, where white and black and brown often will not and, in some cases for safety sake, cannot sit together. They share of how people are divided in that room based on the social sin of our country—racism—and how at times people are divided based on their own sins—as in the case of sex offenders who congregate at their own table. The cafeteria, as well as the yard, and other places of potential gathering appear to be the realm of the Flesh there at Butner.

For church, our prison brothers welcome us into a new kind of realm—a space marked and ruled by the Spirit. As we enter the room where on Sunday evenings the church gathers, a praise band of Spirit joined brothers leads us in praise and thanksgiving. We are welcomed by ushers and greeters who are no longer marked divisively by their skin color, nationality, or racial group. We are prayed for by those who are no longer known for the worst things they’ve done in their lives, but rather are now known for the great things Christ has done for them and in them and through them. These men who we join for worship together are Spirit bearers—those who operate in the realm of the Spirit’s freedom that is marked by a fruit that is love, joy, and peace. Surrounded by all the things that remind them they are prisoners, these men experience and proclaim the freedom for which they have been set free. In this place where all the evidence points away from freedom as typically defined, this prison church is characterized by Spirit fruit vividly standing against the effects and works of the Flesh. By God’s Grace and the presence of the Spirit, Paul’s words come alive there at Butner Federal Prison: For freedom, Christ has set you free.

So I wonder today, when people come to worship with us, will they, do they, see similar fruit? Are the characteristics of our communal life such things as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Look around, what fruit of the Spirit’s freedom do you see? The Spirit has set us free for one another. May you go out together singing a freedom song—living together in the reality made available to us by Christ’s Spirit. Amen.