

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

TRUE FREEDOM 1 Corinthians 9:16-23

The freedom that we are afforded by the benevolent secular power of our government is an anemic freedom. Actually it is worse than anemic, it is illusory. We are blessed to be free from despotic rulers and oppressive totalitarian governments and to have some say in who it is who is going to govern us as a nation, state or city. But are we truly free? Or have these secular blessings merely masked a deeper oppression?

To address that question we need to look back to the origin of human beings. The truth is that we were created as dependent beings – beings that are designed to be dependent upon God – so even when we deny God and celebrate our autonomy we will find ourselves dependent upon something. If that something is anything or anyone other than God, then our dependency will be experienced as slavery and oppression. St. Paul makes this point in the ninth chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians.

¹Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? ...⁴Do we not have the right to our food and drink? ⁵Do we not have the right to be accompanied by a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? ⁶Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? ...

¹¹If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap your material benefits? ¹²If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we still more?(1 Cor 9:1, 4-6, 11-12).

If we can only be free by demanding our rights, then we are not free at all. When we demand our rights, we only chose to be oppressed by them for they then dictate who we are. By contrast, the freedom we have as Christians is the freedom to reject all other motives for following Jesus other than that of loving obedience. All our security and significance is bound up in being a disciple of the Master, so we need no other incentive or reward. We are then free from the need to compromise our first love in order to protect our rights. We must remember that as Christians our identity is bound up in our being stewards, that is, servants of our Master.

Our knowledge-based freedom is only to be exercised under the law of love. To act otherwise is to be ignorant of the truth that we are created as interdependent beings, all of whom are dependent upon God. This is true for believers and non-believers alike. In short, all we do effects everyone around us and is a witness to what we really hold as most important in our life. For example there is the man who has dinner with his friend who is struggling with alcoholism and goes ahead and orders a martini. There is nothing wrong with ordering a drink, but under the circumstances he is tempting his friend to endanger himself or perhaps causing his friend to feel devalued and deficient. Anyone who knows the two men and sees them at the table, will surely decide that the man with the drink is an uncaring and selfish bore. Such a story will certainly percolate throughout the social networks of those individuals.

As Christians we should never intentionally do anything that will cause another member of the Church to act against his or her conscience. The one who knows that he is free is the one who can easily deny himself that specific freedom. He is simply free to do so. His conscience is clear whether he exercises his freedom or not. To deny what we may do is not a violation of conscience. The great commandment (Matthew 22:37) is our guide when it comes to exercising our freedom. Would exercising our freedom result in the expression of love for God and love for our neighbor? If it does not, then even though we are permitted to do something, and it is ours to do by right, under the specific circumstance we would be in disobedience to God's commandments, and therefore, guilty of sin.

In a world where people are drowning in their "rights" we need to recognize the eternal peril of our neighbors. We must open our eyes to the fact that they are in over their heads in the waters of this world. Our approach should be to use our freedom in Christ as we would for a man who was literally drowning. Once the branches have been extended, the rings tossed and the ropes thrown, the surest way to save a drowning man is to get into the water with him. The "safe" life-saving methods are those that work with a man who can recognize them as vehicles of salvation and can grasp them, but not the one who is beyond such a rational recognition and decision. To carry the metaphor further, if you are to get into the water and rescue the drowning man you must be free of a number of encumbrances. First, and most obvious, you must know how to swim and be free from the fear of the water. Second, you must be free from the fear of ruining your clothes or shedding them in public. Third, you must be free from bondage to natural self-preservation instincts. Fourth, in order to save the man you must be free from the time constraints of a densely packed schedule. Fifth, you must be free from the delusions of heroism so you can be single-minded in the task before you, which is to rescue the drowning man. In short, you have to exercise your freedom in order to become like the man in the water, but with one important difference. You are no good to him, or anyone else, if you join him in the act of drowning.

For St. Paul, the world of the Corinthians was filled with drowning people. Some were drowning in their religious observance, some in their disregard of ritual and law, others in their possession of secret knowledge, while still others in their ignorance. He had neighbors who were virtually dead in their rights. Consistent with every human community, the Apostle encountered those who were deeply immersed in their racism or cultic identity. To all these, St. Paul preached the Gospel, and although some grasped its life-saving message, many more remained in peril in the sea. With the singleness of purpose that is the call of Jesus, he exercised his freedom to jump into the water to save them. Like the Incarnate Son who became one of us, yet remained sinless, St. Paul joined those who were perishing without abandoning his first love, his obedience to Christ.

Although we have certain worldly rights that go with our citizenship, vocation, economic and social status, we are free if we are able to refuse any of these if they come between us and obeying Christ, because our ultimate identity is found only in him. We are the recipients of his grace – redeemed sinners and vessels of his good news. Therefore, our freedom should be exercised by denying ourselves, including our rights, in order to serve God and our neighbors.

Let us pray:

Only by the guidance of your Holy Spirit, O God, can we avoid doing things only to please ourselves. Open the eyes of our hearts to see those around us and the effect our choices would have upon them. Then enable and empower us to be free enough to choose to take a course that is best for our neighbors and for your kingdom in this world. May our knowledge of you and our neighbors override our knowledge of what we are able to do by right. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on February 5, 2012, the Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B.