

Sermon Series: Set Free|
Sermon Title: Love
Galatians 5:13-26

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I love the context in which Paul locates his discussion of the fruit of the Spirit. “For you were called to freedom...”. In Christ, we are called to freedom. That’s good news. God wants us to be free. Paul will go on in his discussion of the fruit of the Spirit to describe what this freedom looks like and we’re going to devote 8 weeks to reflecting upon this idea that in Christ we have been set free and how that freedom should shape our lives.

We live in a nation in which freedom is highly prized. Our anthem even says we are the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” And mostly we can speak, think, travel, believe, pursue our own course, and within certain limits, do pretty much as we please. In part, this is what it means to be free. And these freedoms are a great gift that we should not take for granted and for which we should be abundantly thankful.

And yet how ironic it is that some have suggested that our age will be known, not as an age of freedom, but as the age of anxiety. Even though we are among the freest people in the world we remain anxious about many things: having enough money, having good health, being secure and safe, how many “likes” our most recent post received, worried about our pasts and anxious about the future.” (Willimon)

So, are we truly free? Or, is the freedom we celebrate like whitewash, a cheap cover-up that is applied to hide the deeper reality of just how enslaved we really are? Is it barely possible that while we claim that we are free, we actually are laboring under a different kind of tyranny – the tyranny of the self - in which we are now enslaved to our own small passions and are unable to liberate ourselves from our small, self-centered desires, our own nagging anxieties, and our own limited understanding and vision? Are we really free?

John Wesley often warned the early Methodists against the dangers of lawlessness. Some, in his own day and ours, wrongly taught that our freedom in Christ means that we have no need of either disciplined living or of good works. He countered this notion by teaching that for a Christian disciple true freedom does not mean that we are free to do as we please. That’s actually another form of slavery. Christian freedom is not freedom *from* but actually freedom *for*. Freedom does not mean the absence of any responsibilities or obligations. So what many people call freedom ironically turns out to be little more than slavery to our own passions and desires. The liberating truth of the gospel is that Christian freedom, or the freedom Christ offers us, is the freedom to be fully the person God created us to be. To be anything other than the one God intends for us to be is to remain captive to our sin and self-centeredness. And it is that captivity that Jesus longs to free us from – literally to free us from an unhealthy attachment to our own selves. And so, Jesus invites us to lose our lives for his sake and to deny ourselves and take up the cross. Therein lies true freedom.

The Jesuit writer Anthony de Mello observes, “If you look carefully you will see one of the things that causes the anxiety, and worry and unhappiness that seem to hold us captive is attachment.

Attachment is hopelessly clinging to people, to things, to ideas, even ideas about God because you believe that without that person, or idea, or thing you cannot be happy. And if we understand freedom as the ability to do whatever we please, it is another form of slavery because it leaves us attached, clinging to, enslaved by the very things we were told would make us free.

And so, we hold tight to our money, we cling to relationships, to our careers, to our health and our lives, we're attached to our limited ideas about God, because we believe they are what makes us free. Only we wake up one day and realize that we have become slaves to the very things that we thought were going to be the source of our freedom and happiness. All the while Jesus is saying to us, "Let go, cling to me, and I will set you free."

What Paul is trying to get at was later summarized by the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth. Barth writes, "True freedom is not a choice between alternatives; our one freedom is obedience to the will of God. What we call freedom as 'free will' is not freedom at all. We are free if we agree with God, otherwise we are prisoners..." (Barth)

In this same light Augustine distinguished between the smaller freedom and the greater freedom. The smaller freedom is doing what I want, that is an unhealthy attachment to people and to things, the greater freedom is doing what God would have us do. Too many of us settle for the smaller freedom and so are not really free at all.

Paul reminds us that it is by the cross of Jesus Christ that our liberation, our true freedom is won. By the cross of Christ we are set free, not to do as we please or to follow our own way, but to lay our lives down, to give them away, to live as Christ's disciples and devote ourselves with unwavering obedience to his Kingdom. You see the truth is a paradox. By the cross of Christ, we are made free; liberated from ourselves and from the power of sin and death in order that we might become slaves of Christ. So true freedom, the freedom God longs to give us is found not in attaching ourselves to people, or things, or even religious traditions that we think make us free, but true freedom comes when our hearts and our lives are bound by the chains of the gospel.

True freedom is found not in clinging to my life as tightly as I can, but in clinging to Christ, denying self, and taking up the cross. And Paul then tells the Church in Galatia that this freedom has a peculiar shape and that shape he calls the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, when we are free in Christ, when we are attached to nothing or no one but him, our lives actually begin to look more and more like Jesus. And so, the beginning and the end of this Christ-shaped freedom is love.

"For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13-14) Discipleship, following Jesus, being the Church is about having the fruit of love manifest in our lives. We are most free when we love. Otherwise, we remain bound in sin. So, what do we really mean when we use the word "love" and what does Paul mean when he tells us that love is the fruit of the Spirit?

Now we've come to understand love primarily as a feeling, an emotion, an affection for someone else and so we may wonder how are we supposed to love people we don't feel anything for or for which we have bad feelings? First, we need to understand that Christian love is much more than affection or feeling. Christian love, the love we are called to have for God and neighbor is active, it is a way of life. The kind of love embodied in Christ and that we are called to as followers of Jesus is a lived-out commitment, a long obedience in the same direction, it's a for better or worse, in sickness and in health way of life. It's not about liking others. It's about finding a way to pursue God's will for others, to want what's best for our neighbor, even when we don't particularly like them, and even when we think they don't deserve it. Love is about being faithful and obedient to God by committing to God all our heart, mind, body, and soul and then loving our neighbors as ourselves. Christian love, love that is the fruit of the Spirit, is always cross-shaped love.

James Howell wrote, "For us, the word charity usually means something like giving spare change to the needy. But charity comes from a Greek word meaning love, grace, free mercy... God's will is about charity, about love. God's will isn't abstract speculation (WWJD); God's will is that we love, that we are loved, that God loves – and that love is real, practical, sacrificial, tangible, active, and lasting. Howell asks, could it be that our failure to love is a very dark hole we've fallen into that keeps us from walking around in the daylight of God's will? In other words, because we struggle to love well we don't really understand God's will well. Or, have we trivialized love, reducing it to warm, fuzzy feelings about people we enjoy and who seem to exist to indulge our desires? When we love, the way Jesus loved, we are very close to God's will. If we do not love, and to the degree that we fail to love we tumble away from God's will." (St. Francis, p. 11)

In Christ, we have been set free to love – to love God, to love our families and friends, to love our neighbors, even to love our enemies and those who would do us harm. Jesus didn't just talk about love; He embodied it; He lived it.

We see love in Jesus touching the untouchable, speaking with those who are never spoken to, listening to those who usually have no voice, love is Jesus spending time with those who were not considered worthy of God's or our time, seeking out those who are forgotten, love is sharing our seat at the table with those who are rarely invited guests, love is God saving the likes of you and me when we are lost. Love is Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, on his knees washing the feet of his disciples. Love is arms outstretched on a cross forgiving enemies and gathering all of creation in one, final everlasting embrace. Those who are free in Christ bear this kind of fruit, this kind of love.

And what makes it possible for us to love in this very powerful and particular way is not some heroic act of our will. What makes this way of love possible is that we have first been loved by God. Only because of that can we then give love to others. For us to want to give love to others, we must be full of love to give. Which is why Jesus' says, the first commandment is to love God, to attach one's self wholeheartedly to God, to be filled with the love of God, because Jesus knows that we cannot love our neighbors as we should unless we are first filled with God's love ourselves. Remember, this is the fruit of the Spirit. This is God's work within us. "It is God who moves us to do what we do, and if we've given God our heart, our mind, our soul, then God's

love will flow from us to others. Once we love God deeply enough we will love our neighbor and even our enemies to the same extent because, as we grow in our love for God, we also grow in our love for the things God has made, including other people. When we know how much God loves us then we can only live our lives radiating that same love.” (Mother Teresa)

It seems so odd, so contrary to reason to say, but when we are slaves of Christ we are free. Until then, no matter how free we think we are, we are merely captive to someone or something else and ultimately we're left wanting because only in giving our hearts and lives to the God who made us will we find peace. The more attached we are to Jesus, the more we become our truest self, the more fully human we become, because he's the most fully human one to ever live. The more our life is caught up in his, the more we will bear the fruit of the Spirit like love. So once again, hear the good news, “You were called to freedom.” God in Christ has set you free – free to love. Amen.