

The Paradox of Christian Freedom
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“For freedom Christ has set us free.” That’s how Paul said it in Galatians 5:1. Jesus in John 8:36 put it this way, “When the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” Luther (in *A Treatise on Christian Liberty*, 1521) put it this way, “The Christian is perfectly free, subject to none, and perfectly bound, servant to all.” The paradox of Christian freedom is that our Lord has set us free to serve. That’s what Jesus said last week to his disciples as they gathered behind closed doors to learn about the Cross: *we lead by serving*. (Mark 10:45) That’s what Jesus did in that famous scene on Maundy Thursday, when he gathered behind closed doors again in the Upper Room, where he broke bread with his disciples at the Last Supper. He washed their feet, and again showed what he meant: *we lead by serving*. (John 13:12-17) It was a model that didn’t go over big with the Romans in the first century. It is a model that doesn’t go over well with persons seeking to be important today. There aren’t too many settings – in politics, or business, in settings large or small, whether we’re talking about elected leaders, self-appointed survivors, folks who have climbed the ladder step-by-step, or leapfrogged others to jump to the top – where learning to *lead by serving* is the model that guides or the good that inspires us today.

Closer to home in the context of our everyday lives, the freedom for which Christ has set us free, the freedom Jesus promises in our Gospel, has a much more down-to-earth feel and meaning. On the one hand, we know that freedom has to do with the right to decide and make choices – in the grocery store, with the remote on television, choosing where we live, what we do, whether to worship. We experience freedom through deciding for ourselves and choosing among alternatives. On the other hand, we all also know that freedom implies responsibility. Otherwise, we might be talking about pure, unadulterated selfishness, what the Scriptures call *licentiousness*, reserving to oneself the God-given right to choose anything we’d like, the freedom to do as we please, without regard for what pleases God, without regard for what strengthens our community, or contributes to the good of all. Freedom to decide and act, freedom with responsibilities, freedom to live in a way that contributes to the common good: these considerations take us from the visions of freedom that thrive in the cereal aisle of our grocery store to the ivory towers of philosophical reflections on the Good, the Right and the Truth. As Jesus says, knowing the Truth is what sets us free, free to love what is truly good, and do what is truly right.

Americans are a freedom-loving people, with a freedom-loving history, dating back to our founding with the Declaration of Independence, with seven wars and a couple of conflicts to maintain it here at home, and recent incursions into Iraq to obtain it for others. George Bush was speaking from this uniquely American vantage point when he offered his view that peoples around the world, as part of our very nature, long for freedom and prosper when it’s ours. Ever since my days as a political science major at

the University of Connecticut, I have enjoyed following themes present in presidential rhetoric. For John Kennedy, *Camelot* dominated recollections of his term in office. With LBJ and Richard Nixon, *expletives deleted* were more telling than the rhetoric itself. I don't know what Jimmy Carter said, but I recall what he wore, that cardigan sweater as he encouraged us to *Whip Inflation Now*. For Ronald Reagan, it was *Morning in America*. For George Herbert Walker Bush, it was *a thousand points of light*. Bill Clinton's behavior in office overshadowed his deeds and his words. For Barack Obama, it's the *audacity of hope*. George W. Bush made *freedom* the keynote theme of his speeches. Think what you want about his performance in office, the rhetoric in his speeches spoke proudly and often about the power of freedom to animate our nation. "God has planted in every human heart the undying desire to live in freedom," which is "the deepest need of every human soul." This longing and need for freedom can be suppressed, by any and all means; but it cannot nor will not ever be crushed.

The case could be made, and was made rhetorically by George Bush, that our incursions into Iraq (and Afghanistan) were justified by the opportunity for freedom we were making possible for others. Again, these are uniquely American sentiments when it comes to understanding this love and longing for freedom. But, as we have found in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in essays on freedom in political philosophy down through the ages, freedom doesn't exist in a vacuum. It is a means to other aims, equally as basic in the lexicon of human loves and longing, like living in peace (rather than fear), like striving for order (rather than chronic chaos), seeking laws that secure justice (rather than strongmen who intimidate with threats). I'm not trying to go all academic on you. I just want us to understand why Jesus, and Luther for that matter, didn't elevate freedom to an end in itself, or even our highest aim. For Jesus it was truth that set us free, and it was righteousness that freedom served.

Do you know how many times in the Gospels that Jesus calls our attention to God's gift and promise of freedom? He does so only once, in this text, and no where else, not once. Figuratively speaking, he refers to Satan as the strongman who breaks into our house to bind us up (Mark 3:22-27); and, as our Savior, Jesus unbinds us, loosing one man's tongue, freeing others bound by one disease or another, even commanding friends to unbind Lazarus that he might walk freely from the grave and take his place among the living. But when he talks about the freedom that comes through the discipleship of following him, he talks of being bound by his teaching, taking his yoke upon us, a yoke that is gentle, bringing rest for the weary and comfort for all who say YES to his call. Paul employs this same kind of contrasting imagery in Galatians. "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not allow your freedom to become the yoke to slavery again." That's what Luther meant when he said, "The Christian is perfectly free subject to none, and perfectly bound (yoked), called to serve all."

For the record, Luther was much clearer when talking about this paradox of Christian freedom than when advocating for freedom itself. Looking back at his classic 16th century

debates with Erasmus, Luther found himself arguing for the bondage of the will rather than making his stand with the case for free will. When he did make his stand for faith and freedom, it was the language of being *bound* by God's Word more so than being free to decide for himself that proved crucial. He argued that his conscience was *bound* by the Word of God, grounded in the will of God, set free by a Savior and empowered by the Spirit to serve the cause of God's righteousness. "Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason ... I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise." This was as strong a case for Christian freedom as one will ever see. And yet, it wasn't as a free man but as one bound to conscience and the Word of God that Luther stood his ground against cardinals, kings, and popes. Of course, the freedoms we now enjoy (and espouse) have been centuries in the making, inspired by Luther, to be sure, informed (to a greater degree) by Erasmus and Enlightenment, nudged along by Christian dissenters like the Quakers and the Shakers, gradually to give rise to democratic freedoms, declarations of independence, and our bill of rights. But however we got here, none dispute the power of these texts attributed to Jesus and Paul, or the witness of our Lutheran heritage and the history of Christian faithfulness in forming the foundation for the freedoms we treasure.

I must confess that liturgical celebrations like the one we are celebrating today, the Festival of Reformation Sunday, are occasions that fill me with great pride, partly because I love the way our Sanctuary looks in red, but mostly because of the contributions Lutherans have made to the life of the church and the broader culture around us. Today is a history lesson in freedom, not because freedom is our highest value, the be-all and end-all of every individual's existence. Today is a reminder that freedom requires a connection to responsibility, allowing us to be accountable for what we do, as we acknowledge and honor our obligations to love God and serve others. Here's how Paul put it in 1st Corinthians 10:23, "All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful." We are free to do all things, but not all the things we do build up the communities in which we live. This is not intended as empty rhetoric, a pious platitude. It is a down-to-earth opportunity to maintain the peace and sustain the progress we're making in pursuing our mission here in the community at Zion – through the offerings we give, the time we commit, the talents we share, building up our church community at Zion, and then applying what we learn here to how we live in our homes, at work, in our neighborhoods, and throughout our community. Sure, sometimes we fail to live up to God's call, but that's no excuse to give up. It is a reason to return, again and again, Sunday after Sunday, offering confession, receiving forgiveness, and starting anew to make the connection between the freedom that's ours, God's law of love, and Christ's call to serve.

For freedom Christ has set us free – free to be faithful, not to live selfishly without regard to others, but to learn to *lead by serving*. The Christian is perfectly free, subject to none, while at the same time and with this same freedom, we are bound and yoked to Christ's call to live as a servant, subject to all. That's the freedom we celebrate today, the freedom to live ... and serve ... in Jesus' name. Amen