

Reflecting on Freedom in Christ

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In our reading from Galatians this morning, Paul declares confidently that Christ has set us free. Freedom is a key ideal in the Christian tradition, and in the broader society we live in. This is the final weekend of June, a month we set aside specifically to celebrate people's freedom to live fully and authentically as themselves. This past week, we observed Juneteenth, commemorating the emancipation of enslaved Africans. Next week, the United States celebrates the 4th of July, a holiday that has in many ways become synonymous with a celebration of freedom and the lengths this nation has gone to gain and defend it.

If I'm being honest, discussions of freedom often leave me feeling uneasy, particularly as a citizen of the United States, a country that has often waved the banner of freedom while actively trampling the rights and freedoms of people of color, indigenous people, immigrants, queer and trans people, and others. I cannot help but think, in the summer of 2022, just weeks after the deadly shootings in Buffalo and Uvalde, of the way appeals to individual freedoms are often leveraged politically and of the deadly consequences of defending freedom above all else.

Paul, it seems, understood that freedom is complicated. In the verses that follow his declaration that Christ has set us free, Paul takes time explaining this freedom to the church. It is not, he says, "an opportunity for self-indulgence," but instead he insists that through love we are to understand ourselves as bound to one another. "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment," he reminds us, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Paul goes on to list the dispositions and behaviors he believes we ought to and ought not to cultivate in our freedom, expanding on his understanding of the type of people we are called to be. Freedom in Christ, it seems, is not a completely unbounded freedom. It is not a license to do whatever we want. It involves being in good and loving relationships with one another and ought to bring about the fruits of the spirit - love, kindness, gentleness, goodness, peace.

Paul was certainly not the last to consider the complexities of freedom from a Christian perspective. Dominican priest and foundational catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas reminds us of the centrality of the common good, a phrase that refers to our duty to work together to seek the wellbeing and flourishing of all people. Our freedom in Christ comes with a commitment to care about and for each other, to understand our wellbeing as interconnected.

This notion of communal flourishing is picked up by our own Martin Luther. In his treatise *On Christian Liberty*, Luther writes that Christian freedom does not mean we are at liberty to do

whatever we would like. Rather, we are to be free in the way that Jesus modeled. For Luther, the proper effect of Christian freedom is an emptying of oneself, becoming a servant, treating our neighbor as God has treated us. Here we see echoes of the Fruits of the Spirit Paul lists in Galatians 5, fruits like kindness, generosity, self-control. But we also get echoes of Paul in Philippians chapter 2, in which he reminds us that Jesus emptied and humbled himself in order to bring about good for humanity. Jesus chose to live his freedom for others, even when that came at a great cost. For Luther, our freedom, modeled on Jesus' life, calls to bear each others' burdens, to take care of each other, to empty ourselves as Jesus did.

Luther understood that exercising our freedom can have a direct impact on the people around us. We don't make decisions in a vacuum, completely alone. Luther cites Paul, who explains that while Christians are not bound by purity laws such as those regarding the regulation of food, Christians should also be careful not to exercise that freedom in such a way that would cause a person who does not yet "understand their freedom" to stumble or take offense. It may not be helpful, the argument is, to eat freely in front of someone who believes their religious piety is tied to restricted eating, as such an act might cause this person distress or confusion. What is important about this for our discussion of freedom is not, precisely, the conversation about religious laws and dietary piety, but rather the insight about freedom Luther finds contained within this larger discussion. For Luther, this lesson from Paul reminds us that freedom happens in relationship. It is exercised in community. We are not set free to live alone, to do as we please without considering anyone but ourselves. We are set free within and as a church, a community. This requires that any exercise of freedom be done with the potential impact on other people in mind. True freedom for Luther does not strip us of our responsibilities, from the ways we are in relationship with one another. And sometimes those relationships and our responsibilities to them mean our freedom might rightly be constrained, as in the case of respecting someone else's beliefs about food and religious piety.

There's something very powerful about this articulation of freedom. As a citizen of the United States I am most used to hearing about freedom in the context of the individual. For better or for worse we are a nation built, at least in theory if not always in practice, on the notion that every person has rights, has freedoms that must be protected. Freedom of speech, the right to bear arms. Often this is good. This language of freedom and rights can be leveraged to defend and protect people's inherent dignity and their ability to flourish. We use this language to call for people's civil rights, their ability to live their lives free of unnecessary interference from the government or other authorities. The importance of that cannot be understated.

But what I think this articulation of freedom has too often missed is the community of it all, the way we are always, always in relationship with one another. In a world in which having one's freedom limited is often seen as an unbearable infringement, the Christian account of freedom offers something a little bit different. It is no longer my freedom, but *our* freedom. Thinking of

freedom as ours, as something we share, changes the shape of that freedom. It's something collective, something that aims at the common good. This type of freedom lovingly empties itself to make space for all people to live and flourish, even when that means we might have to agree to give something up.

This does not mean that I cease to be an individual with needs and desires and yes, freedoms, that ought to be defended. Rather, in a world that often teaches us to focus on "I," the freedom we are offered in Christ reminds us that there is also we, us, community. That being free together means that we do not and cannot do whatever we want whenever we want, but that we ought to seek each other's good together. After all, absolute freedom often puts us in conflict. Do we preserve my absolute freedom of speech, my freedom to say whatever I want, or other people's freedom to live without the harm my words might cause? Do we preserve my right to own and carry a weapon of war, or our collective freedom to gather for worship, go to school, or shop at a grocery store free of the threat of injury or death. Is a nation's freedom to define and defend its own borders most important, or does the freedom of a migrant to pursue safety and a better life usurp that freedom? When are any of these freedoms best defended by laws enforced by the government, and when are they choices we need to make as a community?

Finding the line between preserving our individual freedoms to live fully and authentically as ourselves and our collective freedom to live well in community is rarely straightforward or easy. There is a reason Paul, Aquinas, Luther, and others all felt compelled to consider and reconsider the nuances of Christian freedom and what it means to live freely in Christ while in loving relationship with God and with each other. But as Paul says, Christ has set us free, free to live together, to live bound in loving relationships with one another. Being bound to one another in this way may include sacrifice. It might involve emptying ourselves as Jesus did, making space to be in relationship with one another. But it need not be a burden. After all, Paul tells us that the fruits of the spirit are joy, peace, and love. I think taking responsibility for one another in this way breaks open the possibility for true freedom, true joy. It sets us free to live as we are meant to, together.

So let us go forth and pursue that freedom, in community.