

**“Freedom From and Freedom For”
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. R. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan – June 26, 2022**

**Please Read:
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
Luke 9:51-62**

Paul writes, “For freedom Christ has set us free...” This is the most glorious claim of the good news, that in Christ we are set free. But what does that really mean? I had a sermon written, and then two Supreme Court decisions came down Wednesday and Thursday of this week that deeply grieve and anger me. It’s some of the most egregious political irony that the two decisions are juxtaposed one striking down gun laws limiting possession of guns in public, and the second, striking down *Roe v. Wade* which gave women for the last half century the fundamental right to determine what happens to their bodies. Basic freedoms are being trampled, and so I invite you to reflect with me on what is this freedom at the heart of the Christian gospel...

The first quality of Christian freedom is a freedom *from*. Just after Paul asserts that Christ has set us free, he urges the church to “Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery...” What “slavery” was Paul talking about? He was talking about the slavery that comes from legalism and the burden of justifying oneself, making oneself right before God under the law. The plain truth of the gospel asserts there is no way for anyone to make themselves right before God. Our rightness, or *righteousness* before God, comes *by grace through faith*.

Grace is something we all struggle with to a lesser or greater extent. I struggle with it as I write my sermons. Preachers like to joke, “You’re only as good as your last sermon.” There are many variations on this theme: You’re only as good as you look. You’re only as good as your education. You’re only as good as your position in the company. You’re only as good as your investment portfolio... You get the idea... This is living by the law. It’s all about what you do to make yourself OK.

Too many Christians get caught up in this same type of thinking. If I go to church, if I say my prayers, if I do good deeds, if I don’t swear, then I’ll be OK... But let’s be clear: That’s all human-centered religion; legalism. Paul calls this *living according to the flesh*. Interestingly, it comes in the shape of conservatism *or* liberalism. Living by the flesh means that it’s up to you to make yourself righteous. For the conservative, it’s about a certain code of ethics and morality. As long as you play by the moral majority rules, you’re OK. But as soon as you break those rules, you’re bad, you’re wrong, you’re not OK. For the liberal it’s more about self-discovery and self-determination. In its extreme, it’s about rebellion, raging against the machine, breaking the rules that seem tyrannical. As long as you fight totalitarianism, you’re OK!

Conservatism and liberalism may be at different ends of the political spectrum, but they both have a code for what is right and what is wrong. The dynamic is the same: it’s about what you do or think... Legalism of any political stripe is confining and limiting. And most religious people think the same way: obey the rules, and God will love you for it.

The gospel, however, is a different paradigm. It’s a *tertium quid*, another way. It’s about freedom from finding our ultimate identity and worth in either the left or the right, in finding our meaning in any human-contrived code of conduct or political system. All of that still leads to slavery of some kind. The gospel is about finding our source of identity and value not in

political or religious rules, but rather in loving relationship *by grace through faith*. Rules restrict. But living by merciful and compassionate faith can enlarge, rather than shrink life!

The Declaration of Independence adopted by the Continental Congress on July 4th, 1776 includes the famous words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This document, along with the *Bill of Rights*, tried to make it clear that our republic was to be founded on the principle of freedom *from* tyranny and too much government control or intervention. I’m wondering how many women are feeling *free* today? I was deeply moved by some of the twitter feeds. Women close to me said hearing the Supreme Court’s decision made them weep, both with tears of sadness, but also tears of anger. Maybe it really is that just all *men* are created equal, and somehow can decide for women what choices they have even about their own bodies.

With the Supreme Court decisions this week, a culture of fear and domination has taken a step forward. Thinking more guns will make us safer is simply wrong. And thinking that government that says yes to more guns and no to a woman’s right to decide what’s best for her body is damnable in my mind. It’s a path to destruction, really. The Supreme Court based their decisions on law written 150 years ago. And if women’s individual freedoms can be so easily trampled, beware those of the LGBTQ community! It won’t be long before this mean-spirited Court will challenge basic rights recently won for other minorities.

I have spent time living in totalitarian countries. It’s not pleasant, and of course the minority voice – well, guess what: *there is no minority voice*! That right gets taken away.

We Americans love to say we are the land of the free, home of the brave... But too often we take for granted being free from political tyranny and oppression. But here’s the thing... I’d like to think we can become a country of freedom from sexism, freedom from racism, freedom from bigotry, freedom from poverty, freedom from gun violence, etc....

Which brings me to the second aspect and perhaps more paradoxical quality of Christian freedom: Christ has given us a *freedom for* new life. The freedom we have in Christ is about re-directing our power and choices so that others may live. Mark Labberton says it simply: Justice is aligning our power more with God’s values and priorities.

In our gospel lesson, Luke writes that Jesus “set his face to go to Jerusalem.” This means Jesus is focused on the cross and his energy and freedom on the ultimate task of giving his life for the world. Perhaps that’s what we need to hear today. The way to new life involves suffering and rejection which sometimes leads to terrible losses...

On the way to Jerusalem, Jesus and his disciples are traveling through a Samaritan village, and the Samaritans, historic enemies of the Jews, reject him and offer no hospitality. And James and John offer to “command fire to come down from heaven and consume them.” But Jesus rebukes them. They do not understand the nature and purpose of the liberating power of Jesus. While we are given liberation in Christ, our freedom is not to dominate or destroy others, but to give life. Giving life is at the heart of Christian spirituality, but too many Christians don’t seem to understand. Consider how often we, like those misguided disciples James and John, want to call down fire on our enemies? Consider how Jesus’ teaching may inform and even challenge our national pride and prowess?

In an interesting footnote to verse 56 in your pew Bibles, some ancient manuscripts insert Jesus saying to James and John, “You do not know what spirit you are of, for the Son of

Man has not come to destroy the lives of human beings but to save them.” While we don’t know if this is what Jesus said, it definitely summarizes the spirit of Jesus’ life and ministry. He *gave up* his power to save others. He does not *bring down* his power to destroy them... This is a truth of the gospel we would do well to contemplate...

While we may have a variety of other priorities in life, Jesus calls us to follow him, to go and proclaim the kingdom of God. You’ve heard the joke, “What do you get when you cross a Jehovah’s witness and a Presbyterian? Someone who comes to the door but has nothing to say!”

As challenged as we Presbyterians may be, too often we think proclamation is only about leading people to a confession of faith. Here I think proclamation includes speaking the truth in love, speaking truth to power, even when it is not politically popular or expedient. The question we must ask ourselves is this: Are we using our freedom to help others to live more freely?? Or are we more interested in calling down fire on our enemies?

Calling down fire is living by the flesh. That’s the old life. Tit for tat. Quid pro quo. No, we are called to live a *new* life. Jesus says that no one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.” It’s a simple illustration and any farmer understands what it means. If you start plowing a field, you always need to look forward. The minute you look back, you’ll plow crooked; you’ll quickly go off the tracks. Jesus is calling us to follow and keep our eyes on him and live according to his spirit.

Paul puts it bluntly: “The only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6b), and “The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Loving others is the litmus test for whether you are living under the slavery of the law, by the flesh, according to your own desires, or living by the Spirit. Paul in another ironic twist says that true Christian freedom means through love becoming slaves to one another! Living by the flesh looks at others according to how you can use them, how you can get something from them. Living by the Spirit looks at others according to how you can serve them, how you can offer them new life. And the quality of our lives is clearly seen by the fruit we produce: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

Leith Anderson tells the true story of Abraham Lincoln, who once came across a slave auction. He was particularly drawn to a young woman slave whose eyes radiated hatred and bitterness at the inhumanity of the whole enterprise. Lincoln entered the auction and emerged victorious as the highest bidder for this female slave. Anderson writes: “She asked him what he was going to do next with her, and he said, ‘I’m going to set you free.’

‘Free?’ she asked. ‘Free for what?’

‘Just free,’ Lincoln answered. ‘Completely free.’

‘Free to do whatever I want to do?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Free to do whatever you want to do.’

‘Free to say whatever I want to say?’

‘Yes, free to say whatever you want to say.’

‘Free to go wherever I want to go?’ she added with skepticism. Lincoln answered, ‘You are free to go anywhere you want to go.’

‘Then I’m going with you!’ she said with a smile.”

Jesus came to set us free. Jesus said, "Follow me." There is a new freedom when we follow Jesus and receive and share the gift of his love. He offers a deeper kind of freedom, the freedom *from* the weight of sin, from the shackles of the law, and offers to us the freedom *for* new life through loving and forgiving others. As Jesus did, crucify the passions and desires of the flesh. Let go of the law, the legalism that too often tyrannizes our lives, and live by the Spirit. That will be the freedom that sets us free...

In the name of the One who is our Creator, our Redeemer, our Sustainer. Amen.