

Sermon: Three prepositions
Preacher: Rev. Jonathan Goodell
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I am preaching this morning on a very rich topic, a topic close to our hearts in this political season and a topic that people of faith... and Christians in particular... have a lot to speak about. The topic for this morning is “freedom”. We Christians see this as a living, breathing active force in our lives because of our theology, because of our spirituality and because of the examples of our faith.. How exciting is that?! And my point this morning will rest on three prepositions ... for it is how you modify this word will reveal to you the dynamism, the power of this idea. The prepositions that you choose will reveal to you how deep, sustaining and spiritual your view of freedom actually is. And how you can then show up in the world.

I’ve been thinking about freedom for lots of reasons this year. But I have a particular reason for this ... because Betsy and I returned a month ago from a trip to Munich, Berlin, Dresden and Prague. I was surprised by my reaction to seeing Germany and the Czech Republic. They are a cautionary tale to be sure... the terrible rise to power of authoritarian rule, both Soviet and Nazi. But they are something much more. They also helped me think of freedom politically and spiritually at the same time.

The cities we saw had known powerful oppression in the past century. Munich, the beer hall putsch, Dachau, the early rise of Hitler. Berlin, forty five years of Soviet rule, split down the middle between the east and the west, overshadowed by the Stasi and a culture of spying on one another. Dresden, one of the last theaters of world war two in Europe, bombed and utterly destroyed by the Allies. And Prague, suppressed by Soviet tanks in 1968.

I was awed by this history but I found within this history many stories of spiritual freedom. Let me show you a set of pictures: Prague, the freedom to live with integrity. Jan Hus, a church reformer in much the spirit of Martin Luther who was martyred for his assertions about the equality of all Christians, his criticism of corruption in the church and his belief that all preaching should be directed to the people and in the language they could understand; St. John of Nepomuk who was executed by drowning by order of the king... for not revealing what his wife the Queen of Bohemia had revealed in her confessional; Dresden, the freedom to love and rebuild; Berlin, the freedom to apply sustained pressure (the kiss, Erich Honecker and Leonid Brezhnev of the Soviet Union, 1979); Munich, the freedom to remember. The greatness of a nation is the greatness of its spirit ...its courage to see and act on the truth ... and more than that its heart in the face of oppression.

Our text this morning brings forward three prepositions concerning freedom. This is the letter of all of Paul’s writing that uses this word “freedom” the most. Paul is writing his letter against “the circumcision party”... a group that believed it was necessary for new, Gentile converts to the Christian Way to undergo a conversion to Jewish identity ... including circumcision for men... to become a faithful Christian. Paul had been so driven by his own Jewish identity that when he became a Christian he felt this incredible release, like walking through the Berlin Wall. He was so impressed with the freedom and joy he experienced that he had to explore a radical twist in this theology. For him, nothing is needed for us to be right with God but Gods love exhibited on the cross. All pride, all achievement, all identity issues are brought to a profound peace at the

foot of the cross. God converts the heart from anxiety to peace and provides a freedom that no-one else can offer. And so the circumcision party was degrading this essential insight.

Paul moved from religion as a performance to faith as a stance of openness, trust and hope. As Paul describes this passionate position, he makes it clear that anything “added” to faith in Christ (in this case the rites and practices of Jewish conversion) will take away from God’s gift of grace. If you are curious how strongly Paul feels about this read chapter two where he talks about how he rebuked Peter for waffling on this principle ... or catch the spirit of chapter six where he writes out in awkward long hand just how he feels about it all.

The Jewish faith is known as a faith codified in laws and in a highly ethical sense of behavior. But before all that, the Jewish faith is a faith of covenant, of a relationship between Abram and his descendants and a faithful God.

Paul, then, is incredibly passionate for the covenantal, loving relationship between God and the Jews... and in a Christian perspective, God and humanity... For him it was not be compromised by religious practices of any kind. Practice is fine, as an outgrowth of the faith. But practices can be a distraction.

Betsy and I just saw a funny play at the ART called “Two strangers carry a cake across New York”. The heart of its humor and drama is something a little like this distinction. Dougal is a Brit, a young guy who has grown up on every movie based in New York City. He has been invited to NYC by his father, a father who left the family before Dougal was even born. He is here for one reason ... to connect with his Dad... but to hear him talk at the beginning he is swept up in the razzmatazz of New York City itself. The surface stuff threatens to overwhelm his trip’s meaning and hope.

Okay, it’s not the deepest illustration, but it does capture the ways in which the surface of anything can distract from the deeper purpose within. For Paul, Jewish practices, especially for these new converts are the razzmatazz. He sees it as a poor substitute for the wonder and substance of God’s covenant of love ... first established with Abram and then with subsequent followers. Thinking of the play, Dougal is in NYC to meet his dad, not to go ice skating in Rockefeller Center. People are coming to faith not to be swept up in Jewish practice, circumcision, conversion specifically to Jewish faith, but to find the heart of the relationship with God that is promised.

Christian freedom, then, is the freedom to live without fear.... and thus to live for others, to live with purpose and love. And if you follow Paul’s argument it moves in this way. For him you and I are freed from the Jewish law (the externals of that law) so that we can experience freedom for relationship with God and others. AND to know God and live with God. And the greatest freedom, the greatest joy, is to be led by, filled with God’s very Spirit.

Here are Paul’s words:

“By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

And those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

Here are the prepositions that modify the word "freedom" in a Jewish and Christian framework. We are free FROM, first of all. This is the overthrow of tyranny, in this case the tyranny of the human heart that wants no law, no constraint. Then there is the freedom FOR. Paul even uses the bold image of being indentured servants or slaves. You and I are free for service to others, to being their servants. And finally there is more than a new sense of duty, a new kind of virtue. There is freedom WITH... a sense of relationship with the God of freedom and love, a covenant fulfilled.

I couldn't help being reminded of this procession of prepositions... freedom from, freedom for, freedom with... as Betsy and I travelled.

Freedom from ... a profound value and one to be grateful for when the king is singing "You'll be back, soon you'll see... you'll remember you belong to me!!". Prague sings that song and so does Berlin. We celebrate it with fireworks.

But before, during and after there was the freedom for. the freedom to do something. Isn't it interesting that pressure reveals to us the freedom that lies within, the freedom for.... the ability to know freedom as a deeply internal conviction. When this is married to a sense of service there is a power that we see as divinely given.

Freedom FOR and WITH is a solvent, a way of dissolving so much of the discontent of these days, the name calling and finger pointing, the pop up house of fear that we all want to build and which we resist at every turn.

Paul said this so clearly in today's passage... 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 enslaved to one another.

Freedom is distrusted when the powerful have lost the will or capacity to serve.

Our third preposition is not just freedom from. It is not only freedom for. But it is freedom with, the capacity to identify with others. This is the heart of covenant, an equality of vision, an equality of concern and action.

The virtue or virtues that accompany civic mindedness are born in the stable of humility. The ego, the self, that has been reduced in size begins to have the capacity to think with, feel with, act with others. We are deeply humbled by the Jewish notion of covenant and by its Christian equivalent. We see our actions as resting on the action of the suffering and loving God who released us from human defensiveness by standing in for us and loving us at our worst.

We release control and offer it back to God and to others. We experience a conversion of the heart.

Our heart can be an empty space. When I hear the word freedom I always associate it Janis Joplin's scratchy voice singing "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" (a Kris Kristoferson song about the emptiness of breaking up). Jesus said poetically and prophetically "when a person is purged of a demon that person must fill their house with something better or else the demon will get his demon brothers and move back in." Our heart must be full of the vision of freedom for, freedom for others, freedom for community, freedom for service, freedom for God's vision of the world.

I have a friend who, since 1997, has been traveling to Nepal to build a school in a remote part of the country. His church was invited there by a church in Nepal. The vision that they formed together was of a school that would rival the quality of education that you might find in Kathmandu. For almost thirty years John and his wife Ellen have traveled to Trishuli Nepal to coach and encourage local leaders to build this school. Today a lovely, serviceable building stands as evidence of the vision of an education that goes beyond rote memorization. At eighty John still feels he can make this trip... although not as often. And when I ask him why he goes he says that his Christian vision is of a faith that makes other's richer... in all ways. Another way to phrase this is "freedom with" ... the covenant that celebrates humility and the freedom to work with others and with God's Spirit.

In 1787 Benjamin Franklin, writing to two French intellectuals said "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become more corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."

What is the 'day to day' application of this progression of pronouns... the movement of freedom from... to freedom for... to freedom with? I would suggest that we focus on the idea, each day, that freedom is a gift. You might make a journal and note the moments of freedom however large or small that your life is built on. Let's try that right now.

Now we practice gratitude as an antidote to fear. We think of those who provided so many resources for the practice of freedom. List out names.

Note the spiritual legacy of freedom... its covenantal nature, its ability to pierce the ego, its constant call to something more full and free. Ask yourself how to invest publicly in the life and well being of others this summer.

Benjamin Franklin and his colleagues were often stoics. We are gifted as Christians to look at the world from a place of duty, yes, and also a place of beauty, verve, joy and courage. We are invited to the spirit of Christ who endows us with a generous heart and a flexible mind.

Freedom from, freedom for, freedom with. Where do you find your greatest peace and hope this summer?