

Free At Last

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Galatians 5:1, 13-25

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Sitting at one of the many round tables in the reception hall, Scott meandered over to us, eyes beaming and a smile a mile wide. He was giddy as a schoolboy. Initially he rested his hands on two of the dining chairs, but at hearing the table's congratulations, He stood up straighter, stretched his arms wide, lifted his head to the sky and exclaimed "Free at Last! Free at Last! Thank God Almighty, I'm Free at Last!" The words dripped with emotion and relief in a way that surprised me. Though I had not been to many weddings at that point, it seemed like an odd proclamation for a new groom. When I thought of marriage I thought of love, of course, but also responsibility and decisions and other real grown up stuff, which at 22 I did not feel ready for at all. I wanted to have as little of that grown up stuff as possible, so that I could be free to do what I wanted.

What does it mean for individuals today to be free?

Does it mean to have an unencumbered life void of responsibilities? To make decisions on one's own? To live with dignity and respect? To speak honestly and openly? To choose one's leaders? To seek and obtain the vocation you feel called to? To raise a family?

What does it mean for those living in America to be free today? In their "debates" last week the twenty Democratic Presidential nominees urged that it meant health care, education, equal opportunity, safe lodging, respect and dignity.

The list of freedoms, both those desired and those enjoyed by us in the United States is long.

The list of what we are freed *for*, particularly as people who follow Jesus, is much shorter. Because, if we follow Jesus, if we obey his teachings, we obey Love itself, for God is love.

And Love, as Frederick Buechner defines “above all else wishes us well, leaves us the freedom to be the best and gladdest that we have it in us to become” (<http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/9/27/freedom>). We are transformed by God’s love even as we freely give it away. In our freedom, filled with God’s love, this is what we must do: be loving and just.

This is the freedom Paul proclaims to the young fledging Christian community in Galatia and this is the one his words proclaim this day: “For freedom, Christ has set us free” (5:1). He goes on to tell us what we are free to do: to love our neighbors as ourselves. Out of his infinite love for us, through Jesus, God died on a cross. In his rising, Jesus proclaimed the power of that love. As Paul told the Romans, nothing, not life or death or anything else, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

And that love is for us all, equally. We can call it God’s great equalizer. As Paul proclaims to the Galatians, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (3:3). The Galatians need to hear this.

They keep judging one another by a mark of flesh: circumcision. These young Jesus followers who were raised in Judaism are clinging to Jewish laws in a way that prevents them from the law above all others: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14). Paul writes: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love (5:6). God loves us all, we are called to act lovingly to *all* of God’s people, even if they believe differently than us.

For some, this call to love is simply too high. They cannot get past their dislike of a person’s lifestyle, looks or attitudes, and show them love. Jack Phillips is one of those people. Phillips is the owner of Masterpiece Cakeshop in Lakewood, Colorado, a bakery that has been, according to its website, “Making great cakes since 1993”. Among its accolades, the Masterpiece Cakeshop was The Knot Best of Weddings Pick for 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2012 (<https://masterpiececakes.com/>). Perhaps this is the reason that Charlie Craig and David Mullins visited Masterpiece in July of 2012 prepared to order their wedding cake. The gay couple was planning a wedding celebration at home in Colorado after getting married in Massachusetts. Charlie and David arrived at Jack’s shop with questions and ideas about their cake, but it was not to be. As soon as they told Jack what the cake was for, Jack refused to make it for them, stating that he did not create wedding cakes for marriages of gay couples because of his Christian religious beliefs.

So much for “the only thing that counts is faith working through love”. So much for loving your neighbor as yourself. So much for loving even when you don’t like.

So much hurt. This refusal turned into the Supreme Court case *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 U.S., a 7-2 decision that Phillip’s religious freedom was violated by the Colorado Civil Rights Commission when it sanctioned him for refusing to make Charlie and David’s cake. This decision made it clear to all gay and lesbian couples that their rights as citizens were not guaranteed but were debatable. The fact that David and Charlie’s rights were challenged made a clear distinction for the entire U.S. L.G.B.T.Q. community: it is one of second-class citizens (Boylan June 5, 2018).

We the People of the United States did not describe all people when it was written, and it still doesn’t today. L.G.B.T.Q. Americans can be legally fired or denied housing in 28 states. Between 2015 and 2018 over 300 anti-L.G.B.T.Q. bills were introduced, and in Oklahoma, gay and lesbian couples can be denied the ability to adopt children.

Our work to create a more perfect, and equal union is far from finished. It is kept from completion because we forget that love, our God given gift, is equally given to us all, and there is enough to go around. God has freed us to spread it to the world. What will we choose to do? The Galatians were hoarding it, sharing it with only those that were similar to them. Kind of like Jack Phillips did in 2012 and is still doing today.

As a church, we have done a magnificent job of loving our neighbors and treating each other with equality. We have long recognized people’s gifts and abilities for ministry regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity, as well as treated those in between homes with respect, kindness and hospitality through our Family Promise ministry. We prepare meals and serve them to the youth L.G.B.T.Q and homeless population in Lakeview through the Night Ministry. Just a few weeks ago at our Service as Worship service we created toiletry kits for the workers at Curt’s Cafй, while 148 youth and adults were on our Appalachia Service Project trip making homes warmer, safer and dryer.

As a community we take seriously the fact that we have been freed to love and we offer it wholeheartedly in myriad ways. Through our hands and feet, casseroles and cookies the fruits of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

In this community, more times than not, the best of each of us is reflected in a body of one that is truly growing in faith while being rooted in love.

The harder part perhaps is how we live our freedom to love individually. How we live it out in our daily lives that are filled with all sorts of things to distract us and pull us away from God. This is a list that we know well: fear, pain, illness, anxiety, depression, loneliness, addiction, greed, power, envy...it could go on forever.

Whatever our thing or things are that are keeping us from loving others, those are the things that God wants to free us from so that we can live the lives the way we deeply desire rather than the way that keeps us surviving but not thriving.

Each of us has but one life to live. What are we doing with it? Just a few minutes ago, we celebrated God's embracing love of Cadence, and with joy we'll welcome her into God's family of love. Cadence was named and claimed as God's child and sent into the world with God's infinite love to share. We were all born and were once an infant like Cadence. We all are living our baptisms each day, going into the world with God's love, given to us all freely. One day we will all die, and our baptisms will be complete. For all of our differences around Evanston, the United States and the world, all of us were born and will die, and all of us are beloved by God.

During the gift of life we've been given, we'd be wise to obey Love, by creating and nurturing relationships built on it. We have been set free, through love, to become slaves to one another; to love our neighbors as ourselves. Such love giving can only happen within relationship, one of mutuality and respect. It is through these relationships and love that our freedom finds meaning.

As I think back to Scott's exclamation about his freedom that night at his wedding reception, I realize that he wasn't so crazy after all. After all, it is honest, respectful and trusting relationships that keep us going. These relationships bind us together even when we feel like falling apart...these relationships make us the best and gladdest that we can become...these relationships give our lives meaning and joy. We are free at last, friends! Free to love without hesitation, judgement or qualification. Free to love, as love has freely been given to each and all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Works Cited

Boylan, Jennifer Finney. "We Need an Equal-Rights Amendment." New York Times, June 5, 2018.

Buechner, Frederick. "Freedom: September 27, 2016" From the Frederick Buechner website www.frederickbuechner.com.
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