

“Freedom, Part 1”

Galatians 5:1, Amos 9:7, Isaiah 61:1, Psalm 119:45, 2 Corinthians 3:17, Galatians 5:13-14, Ephesians 3:12, Romans 8:21, Luke 4:18, Exodus 3:14, Genesis 12:2-3, & Exodus 20:13

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PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING Guide us gracious God by your Word and Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover peace. Amen

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Galatians 5:1 NRSV “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** This is a week to celebrate freedom and be grateful for freedom. If you love someone set them free. God’s grace continually sets us free. Grace is a free gift of God that washes away all that burdens us, breaks every chain that imprisons us, removes every sin that hinders us, purifies every imperfection, so we can enjoy freedom.

God delights in freedom. God gives each person free will. God creates and sustains a cosmos abundant with variety, options, choices, freedom. God is eager for us to explore the delights God has filled the cosmos with for all of us. God has created each of us with particular delights that resonate with the way God created each individual unique. God desires for you to be free, to enjoy your favorite sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. God desires for us to honor the freedom of others by not forcing our preferences onto another.

We are free to be open, accepting, affirming. We are free to be aware that there is much we do not know, so we are free to explore, experiment, taste and see that God is good. Regarding unknowing; some people believe that God has a specific detailed plan for them. They are free to seek this plan. And I am free to believe that God has given me a vast array of options, most of them good options. I believe God has given me freedom to choose the options that bring me joy in each season. I find this freeing to not be restricted to finding a specific plan for my life. Others find it free to follow a specific

plan. As long as we all admit we do not know, resist the urge to declare one's preferred way of life superior, live in a manner that is not fearful, hateful, or hurtful of another, then everyone is free to live as they choose.

Based on the vast variety of the cosmos we can infer that God enjoys diversity, freedom for each person to choose from a variety of forms of worship. Based on the vast variety of personalities, spiritual types and preferences we can infer that God enjoys each person being free to worship in their own style.

Isaiah proclaimed. **Isaiah 61:1** “**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. God has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.**” The psalmist sings. **Psalm 119:45** “**I will live in perfect freedom, because I try to obey God's teachings.**” The Apostle Paul wrote. **2 Corinthians 3:17** “**Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.**” **Galatians 5:13-14** “**You, my siblings, were called to be free. Use your freedom to serve one another humbly in love.**” **Ephesians 3:12** “**In Jesus we may approach God with freedom.**” **Romans 8:21** “**Creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.**” Jesus said. **Luke 4:18** “**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free.**”

Gratitude is a marvelous way to celebrate freedom and remain free. You are free to maintain a gratitude journal, free to tell others how you are grateful for them, free to express your gratitude to God, free to celebrate Independence Day, free to be patriotic, free to be grateful for all who have served so we can enjoy freedom, some of us can be grateful for a day free from work this week, grateful for freedom to gather with family and friends, free to travel, free to explore how many hot dogs one can eat. Gratitude for all one has, sets them free from the bondage of unhealthy wanting.

For generations the Old Testament was passed on orally. They avoided pronouncing the divine name because they considered it too holy to be spoken. They sought to keep God's name free from any restrictions, limitations and constraints. When the Old Testament was written in Hebrew a space, some dots, or four letters, were used so that God would be free from the restriction of any language. When Moses spoke with God. Moses asked for God's name. **Exodus 3:14 "God said to Moses, 'I am who I am'".** God is free of any religion, nation, culture or group. One of the sins that binds us is thinking we know, that we can define God, that we can fully perceive God, that God belongs to us, that one can tell others how to live, claiming it is God's will. We do not even have a name for God that is free from baggage.

The Apostle Paul wrote. **Galatians 5:1 NRSV "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** All people are God's beloved children. All people are chosen. No one is abandoned, forsaken, unchosen by God. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote. "Ancient Israel came to believe that it was God's chosen people who had a monopoly on God's love and God's goodness. In the eighth century the prophet Amos took as his work to help his contemporaries in Israel to see that Israel in its chosenness had no monopoly on God's goodness." Amos proclaims. **Amos 9:7 "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?"** Walter writes. "Israel remembered its emancipation from slavery in Egypt under Pharaoh and imagined that God's Exodus deliverance of Israel was a singular act without parallel in the history of the world. But Amos, to the contrary, insisted otherwise. Amos asks of Israel two rhetorical questions. The first question requires a "yes" from Israel. Yes, Israel is like the Ethiopians. That must have been a surprise and a shock to Israel, to hear itself compared to Ethiopia, a nation of "people of color." Amos challenges the exclusionary self-understanding of Israel. In his second rhetorical question Amos probes the meaning of

the Exodus deliverance with the verb, “bring up from,” that is, “set free from.” Yes, God did bring up Israel from Egypt; without a doubt! Everyone knows that. But then two other claims: Yes, YHWH did bring up the Philistines from Caphtor. Yes, YHWH did bring up the Arameans (Syrians) from Kir. Amos names two foreign peoples that were at different times Israel’s most threatening enemies, the Philistines and later the Syrians. Amos dares to say that God enacts “Exoduses” for Israel’s enemies. Amos affirms that God’ emancipatory power extends to other peoples who are not commonly taken to be “chosen.” Amos debunks Israel’s claim to the exclusionary love and justice of God, and insists that in universal scope YHWH’s emancipatory reach extends everywhere, at many times, and in many places, bringing emancipation for those not yet liberated. Indeed, Amos suggests that the wide sweep of history under YHWH is a sequence of Exoduses, so that there is nothing exclusionary about Israel’s emancipatory memory or claim. Like the earlier questions posed by Amos, these world-shattering questions of Amos require a vigorous “yes” in response. It is a “yes” of gospel emancipation. It is a “yes” of limitless love. It is a “yes” of wellbeing that counters all of our fearful exclusions. The good news summons us to a vigorous, unafraid “yes” toward all those whom the Pharaohs of the world continue to keep in bondage. As the apostle Paul concludes:” **Galatians 5:1 NRSV “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”** End Quote.

I have more questions than answers. Although I have spent my life studying the Bible most things I do not know. It seems to me that God honors the freedom and uniqueness of each individual. There are people who did spectacular loving things in the Bible and they all were imperfect and sinned. God spoke through people and it seems that God honored their freedom. God did not control them so some of the Biblical writers distorted views got written into the Bible. On the other end of the spectrum people are free to see the Bible as inerrant. Because we do not know, we should avoid judging.

Joshua, a wonderful and flawed leader, wrote his own history of the Israelites entering the Promised Land. When anything unloving happens, human nature is to blame others. Blame has plagued humanity from the beginning. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the snake. Inferred is that they blamed God for their freedom to choose good or evil. Joshua and the Israelites did horrible things with the justification of nationalism, the belief that they were exclusively chosen by God and that others were not chosen by God, therefore they could control them, fear them, hate them, destroy them and kill them. Nationalism is a terrible sin. Nationalism seduced them to be certain that they alone were entitled to the Promise Land. God repeatedly declared God's steadfast love for all people. The prophets constantly proclaimed God's commands to love and care for the foreigner, the immigrant, the outcast. God constantly declared God's love for the other. I suspect Joshua was convicted by his unloving ways, by the way he led the Israelites to pillage cities and slaughter people. I suspect Joshua was unable to own his mistakes, to confess these sins, so instead he blamed them on God writing in Joshua that God told him to commit these sins. Joshua's justifications stand in sharp contrast to God declaring. **Genesis 12:2-3 "I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing. All the families of the earth shall be blessed."** **Exodus 20:13 "You shall not murder"** Jesus expounded if you hate anyone, if you are angry with anyone, if you call someone an idiot you are guilty of murder. However, I do not know for some people believe that God told Joshua to kill some of God's beloved children. It does not make sense to me. It is not consistent with God's nature of perfect love, unending grace, Jesus' command to love all people, the theme of God's steadfast, everlasting, redeeming love for all people throughout scripture. I speculate Joshua blaming God for his crimes, and the crimes of the Israelites, is in the Bible to warn us of the sin of taking away freedom from others, the sins of bondage, control, fear, hate and murder of others. It stands in stark contrast to our God of freedom who desires freedom for everyone. Joshua blaming God is seen through history in the sins of nationalism that rationalizes the horrors a country

commits, blames a country's flaws on others and sanitizes its history to justify its behavior. But I do not know. An effective sermon asks the questions and leaves you to wrestle with the Holy Spirit and scripture for the answers.

Last week we promised to “work in the world for peace, justice, freedom, and human fulfillment, caring for God's creation” We promised to work for freedom. Our elders and deacons promised to “follow the Lord Jesus Christ, love their neighbors, and work for the reconciliation of the world. To sincerely receive and adopt the essential tenets of the Reformed faith as expressed in the confessions of our church as authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do, and be instructed and led by those confessions as they lead the people of God?” One of those confessions is The Theological Declaration of Barmen.

These are directly quoted excerpts from the introduction in our *Book of Confessions*. The Theological Declaration of Barmen was written by a group of church leaders in Germany to help Christians withstand the challenges of the Nazi party and of the so-called “German Christians,” a popular movement that saw no conflict between Christianity and the ideals of Hitler's National Socialism. Adolph Hitler playing on people's fear persuaded Parliament to allow him to rule by edict. As he consolidated his power, Hitler abolished all political rights and democratic processes: police could detain persons in prison without a trial, search private dwellings without a warrant, seize property, censor publications, tap telephones, and forbid meetings. Hitler outlawed all political parties except his own, smashed labor unions, purged universities, replaced the judicial system with his own “People's Courts,” initiated a systematic terrorizing of Jews, and obtained the support of church leaders allied with or sympathetic to the German Christians. Most Germans took the union of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism for granted, and patriotic sentiments were equated with Christian truth. The German Christians exalted the racially pure nation and the rule of Hitler as God's will for the German people. Nonetheless, some in the churches resisted. The Theological

Declaration of Barmen contains six propositions, each quoting from Scripture, stating its implications for the present day, and rejecting the false doctrine of the German Christians. The declaration proclaims the church's freedom in Jesus Christ who is Lord of every area of life.

These are directly quoted excerpts from the declaration in 1934. "Try the spirits whether they are of God, to see whether they agree with Holy Scripture and with the Confessions. Scripture tells us that, in this yet unredeemed world in which the Church also exists, the State has by divine appointment the task of providing for justice and peace. We reject that the State could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church's vocation as well. We reject that the church could appropriate the characteristics, the tasks, and the dignity of the State, thus itself becoming an organ of the State. The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people in Christ's stead, and therefore in the ministry of God's own Word and work through sermon and Sacrament." Listen to that again. "The church's commission, upon which its freedom is founded, consists in delivering the message of the free grace of God to all people." End quotes.

The horrors of the holocaust rose from some Christians who believed they knew all the answers, so they took freedoms away from others by spreading false news to create fear. They portrayed others as deserving of blame and contempt, turning fear into hate which was used to ban books, to limit teachings, to pass laws that take away rights destroying freedom, to use courts to control people, to judge people, falsely claiming it as God's will. This allowed them to promote their way as superior, that others were not God's beloved, not chosen, that others were a little less than human. All this eroded the freedom of certain groups which lead to the justification of all sorts of atrocities against them.

This is part one of a two-part sermon series on freedom. Part two will be shared on August 6. This gives us time to meditate on the Apostle Paul's words. **Galatians 5:1 NRSV "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."** Time to advocate for the freedom of all people. Time to be grateful for freedom. Amen