

The Tyranny of False Freedom

by Linda Rex

July 2, 2023, Proper 8 | After Pentecost—In last week's message, we talked about the way in which we as humans often have a mistaken understanding of what it means to be free. We adore freedom—being free to choose what we do, when we do it, and how we do it. But we do not realize how often our freedom actually becomes an entry way to our being enslaved or held hostage.

Before he left us for his eternal glory, Dr. John McKenna told me that he felt one thing our American society needed was to understand what true freedom was. As a people, historically we have valued (at least on paper) the freedoms we espouse, which involve such things as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, right to bear arms, and so on. Because we value these freedoms, we object strongly to anyone placing restrictions upon us, and voice loud complaints when such restrictions occur.

To be sure, there is much benefit in allowing people to freely make decisions and to own property and do the other things that are a part of being a free person. Much of the misery we inflict on one another happens when we do not honor each other's liberties in this regard. But living truly free is difficult for us, because we do not understand what true freedom is. It's important for us to come to see that freedom in the greatest sense of the word goes way beyond these limited human types of freedoms. In fact, true freedom is solidly grounded in the other-centered, self-sacrificial love of Father, Son, and Spirit—the only Being who lives truly and completely free.

Jesus Christ, as God in human flesh, is the one human person who lives a truly free life. Interestingly enough, while he was here on earth, this freely lived life was lived within a culture which embraced slavery and existed under the tyranny of a Roman government marked by paganism, oppressive taxation and military oppression. He was raised within the confines of a legalistic religion, with all its dogma and hypocritical leadership. And still, he lived as distinctly himself, without losing his essential nature as the one sent by his Father to live, die, and rise again on our behalf.

How was this possible? Jesus said at one point that he never did anything he did not see the Father doing. If he was a truly free person, then how is it that he never did anything unless it was what his Father was up to? Could it be that true freedom for us as human beings is in living in full union and communion with our Father in the Spirit as Jesus did? Could it be that freedom has nothing to do with doing what we will and what we desire and everything to do with doing what our Father wills and desires?

For us as humans, this seems to involve a loss of self. But in reality, this is not the truth. If Father, Son, and Spirit are the God who created us and who knows what it means for us to be truly human, then wouldn't this mean that they know what is best for us? And if God is love—other-centered, self-sacrificial love—doesn't this mean that God wants us to live in joy and peace, and develop into the fullness of all he meant for us to be as reflections of his image in Christ by the Spirit?

Taking this further—if life in loving relationship with Father, Son, and Spirit are what we were created for, and if we were meant to live in right relationship with God and each other, then true freedom for us is living in this way, in being truly human, in being our true selves. This means that every part of our existence is swept up into Christ by the Spirit, where our decisions, our choices, our “freedoms” are all held within the bounds of God's love. We are free to enjoy life, rejoice in all God has made, but within the bounds of God's love. God has designed things to

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work a certain way so that we are able to truly live. When we don't stay within these limits, we find ourselves in the place of death.

The good news is that Jesus, in the divine, loving freedom of his Father in the Spirit, went through death into resurrection so that everyone of us might be set free from the chains of evil, sin, and death. Since we all died with Christ, we are no longer slaves to sin. So, we need to act like it. We are set free from anything which hinders our right relationship with God and each other. We are set free from the chains of the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life—those things which so often hold us fast and imprison us. We are under no obligation to live in submission to these things any longer. If we find ourselves where these chains are trying to form about us again, we need to look to Christ, for in him and him alone are we truly free.

Because of Christ, we are free now to be who God created us to be—the beloved, adopted children of Father. Because we are free in Christ, we walk no longer according to our flesh but we are led by the Spirit, are filled with the Spirit, and we follow wherever Christ leads us. We live each moment in face-to-face relationship with Father through the Son in the Spirit, enjoying their *zōe* life now in loving fellowship with others, in anticipation of sharing this life forever in the world to come. This is the gift of true freedom God has given us in Christ—a grace gift that we cannot earn, but can only receive with humble gratitude.

Father, Son, Spirit, thank you for setting us free, for removing the shackles of evil, sin, and death. Grant us the grace to live in the truth of our freedom in Christ. Enable us to remember the price that freedom cost us, and to not give any part of ourselves over to those things which inevitably end up being our masters, no matter how strong the temptation may be in this moment. For it is your will and your desire we seek to fulfill, not our own, through Jesus our Lord and by your Spirit. Amen.

“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:12–23 NASB