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Our Saviour Lutheran Church
June 26, 2022
Pentecost 3

Let us pray...May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, these words are powerful words.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

These words are profound. They are life-altering. They are the essence of who we are as Christians.

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.”

PAUSE

Now, allow me to provide a little context for these words, which come from that great theologian known as Paul.

These words, as we see, appear in Paul’s letter to the Galatians.

And if we didn’t know Paul’s letter to the Galatians was what is called a “circular letter.”

It was letter that was circulated among a number of Christian communities.

It was not intended for a single Christian community in one particular locale.

Galatia was not a city like Corinth or Rome or Thessalonica, to which other Pauline letters were written.

No, Galatia was a Roman district, a region, and as such it contained not one, but multiple churches.

Indeed, Paul addresses this letter to the Galatians with these words, "To the churches of Galatia."

So Galatia was not a city, but a Roman district, and geographically Galatia was located in what is modern day Turkey.

And this letter would then have been received by one church in Galatia, and then that church would have read the letter publicly when their church members were gathered together in community, and they may have even copied the letter so as to have a record of the correspondence, and then the letter would have been carried to a neighboring church in Galatia, so on and so forth.

Thus, the letter was circulated throughout Galatia, and thus the letter to the Galatians is again what is called a circular letter.

PAUSE

And we need to remember that it was Paul who had evangelized these Christians in Galatia.

It was Paul who started these churches in Galatia.

And this letter from Paul to the Galatians would then have been written some time after Paul had moved onto to other mission fields.

But the letter can't be that far removed from Paul's time there in Galatia.

Paul was probably in Ephesus or Macedonia, where he received news about the Christians in Galatia, and Paul was then moved to send them this letter.

PAUSE

But what was it that prompted Paul to write to these Christian communities in Galatia?

Why does Paul suddenly need to correspond with them?

Well, the answer is contained in the letter itself.

PAUSE

And there we find, interestingly enough, that the letter to the Galatians is the only letter from Paul in the NT that does not have a thanksgiving section.

Typically Paul writes to a group of Christians, greeting them, and then in the beginning of the letter, he give thanks to God for those particular Christians to whom he is writing.

But, there is no thanksgiving in Galatians.

Why? Because when Paul writes this letter, he is livid. He is irate. He is mad.

For Paul has learned that the Galatians are abandoning the gospel that he (Paul) has proclaimed to them.

The Galatians are abandoning God.

Paul writes to them, saying, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the God who called you in the grace of Christ..."

Now, more specifically, what had occurred is that other so-called evangelists had come to Galatia shortly after Paul had left, and they have told the Christians in Galatia that they have to be circumcised in order to become Christians.

And Paul is fuming, because if the Galatians allow themselves to be circumcised they are denying Christ, and relying on the law.

Paul is fuming because the Galatians have come to believe that the law is what saves an individual.

And if that is the case, Christ has died for nothing.

If a person needs to keep the law—abiding by the rules of circumcision, abiding by the rules of kosher food laws, and abiding by the Sabbath laws, so on and so forth...

If a person needs to keep the law, in order to be saved, well then why do we need Christ?

So, this is why Paul is fuming. The Christian Galatians are putting their trust in the law.

But Paul knows that the law cannot save us, for we can never keep the law perfectly.

To be sure, the law only reveals the great extent of our sin.

If, for instance, I tell you not to think of pink elephants. Don't think of pink elephants. Whatever you do don't think of pink elephants. What are you thinking about? Pink elephants.

The law works the same way to reveal our sin.

The law tells us, "Don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, or cheat, or defraud our neighbor." So on and so forth, and it is then these very things we are told not to do, that work on our minds and reveal our sin.

So the law can't save us, for we can never keep the law perfectly.

And so then, we come to our reading today where Paul says, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another."

Paul directs our attention away from the law and toward Christ.

Christ alone can deal with sin. Christ alone can save us. Christ alone can make us free.

And again, these words of Paul—"For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another"...

These words of Paul are most powerful, they are profound, they are life-altering.

And, Martin Luther understood very well the significance of these words.

In a treatise entitled "The Freedom of a Christian" written by Martin Luther in the year 1520, Luther wrote these words:

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

And a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The Christian is both a free lord of all, subject to none, AND the Christian is a dutiful servant of all, subject to all.

The Christian is simultaneously these two contradictory things—a free lord and a dutiful servant.

And this paradox derives from Paul's words in Galatians: For freedom Christ has set us free. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.

But what does Paul mean to say to the Galatians?

And what does Luther mean to say to all of us?

In short, in Christ, we are set free from the burden of all that the law requires of us, and in truth we could never fulfill the law anyway.

We are set free in Christ, such that we are subject to none, to no one, to no law.

But, we don't take our freedom for granted, we don't abuse our freedom to indulge our own desires, otherwise we make a mockery of Christ and his cross.

No, instead, our freedom in Christ is given to us so that we can serve our neighbor.

It is not that we HAVE to serve our neighbor—that would smack again of what the law requires of us.

So, it is not that we HAVE to serve our neighbor, but that we get to serve our neighbor. It is a gift, a privilege, a blessing to love our neighbor.

That is why Luther says we are a dutiful servant to all.

That is why Paul says through love we are to become slaves to one another.

The law is simplified in Christ. Paul says, "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

If we love our neighbor, we are not going to want to harm them physically, nor steal from them, nor lie about them, nor cheat nor defraud them.

Love fulfills all that the law requires of us.

This is definition of what it means to be a Christian, who exists in the freedom of Christ.

PAUSE

But how does this translate into everyday life?

How does this translate into what we see going on in the world?

For it is pretty easy for us to see that which stands in opposition to the love of Christ expressed toward the neighbor.

It is pretty easy to see the un-Christian behavior of people.

Like the unprovoked aggression toward a peaceful people.

The senseless destruction and devastation from the Russian military toward the sovereign nation of Ukraine.

Like the ongoing plague of mass shootings in our country.

Like the division and animosity over issues like abortion rights, and gun control legislation.

Like political turmoil because of inflation and the rising prices of gasoline and food.

It is pretty easy to see the behavior, and to hear the words of people who are bent on un-Christian behavior.

It is easy to see un-Christian behavior in people who blame, people who spew vitriol, people who are filled with hate.

It is easy to see the consequences of people who submit to the yoke of sin and evil.

That is easy to see. It is all around us.

But how do we rise above that fray? How do we find a sense of peace? How do we cope in such an un-Christian world?

By remembering that we have been set free in Christ.

We are free in Christ, freed from the burden of sin, freed from the burden of power-plays, freed from shame and guilt, freed from fear and worry...

...freed from all those things that want to enslave us, freed from all those things that want to hinder our life and our well-being...

We are freed in Christ from the yoke of slavery as Paul says, so let us not submit again to that yoke.

Let us not be tempted to engage in anything whereby our lives are not our own, but that we are under the power of sin.

That is what the law did to the Galatians; it made those Christians slaves again, whereby they were not truly free.

That is what can happen to us, too, if we give in to that yoke of sin, if we do not embrace the freedom that comes in Christ.

And embracing that freedom means being a servant whereby we are motivated by love alone.

Listen to the distinction between a life lived in the yoke a sin, and a life lived in Christ.

The life of sin is marked by fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, so on and so on.

Sounds like a pretty horrible existence, doesn't it?

But to the contrary the life live in the freedom of Christ is marked by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

That sounds more like the kind of life one can get behind.

PAUSE

So yes, we are freed in Christ, subject to none, and so, we can rise above the fray, we can rise above the trials and temptations of the world.

But, before we get too complacent in our freedom, let us not forget, we are also called to dutiful service in our freedom, so then we are willing to enter the fray, to care for our neighbor, to love our neighbor, to be an example of God's grace.

And again, we don't do this because we hope to earn our salvation. We do this, because we already saved in Christ.

We do this because we are already freed, and freedom means becoming a slave to one another.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, that is God's great paradox, the paradox in which we find ourselves.

That is the Christian life. Thanks be to God. Amen.