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Our Saviour/St. Stephen  
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Epiphany 2

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

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, we exist in paradox.

Yes, we live, and move, and have our being in paradox.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

This example comes from the movie entitled *The American President*.

Maybe you have seen this movie, starring Michael Douglas who plays Alan Shepherd who is President of the United States.

The movie also stars Annette Benning who plays Sydney Wade, an environmental lobbyist.

And my most favorite scene from this movie is where Micheal Douglas' character interrupts the press secretary, who is speaking to reporters at the White House.

Douglas' character interrupts this press conference at the White House and in the midst of his remarks he says these words...

"America isn't easy. America is advanced citizenship. You've gotta want it bad, 'cause it's gonna put up a fight."

"It's gonna say, 'You want free speech? Let's see you acknowledge a man whose words make your blood boil, who's standing center stage and advocating at the top of his lungs that which you would spend a lifetime opposing at the top of yours.'"

"'You want to claim this land as the land of the free? Then the symbol of your country cannot just be a flag. The symbol also has to be one of its citizens exercising his right to burn that flag in protest. Now show me that, defend that, celebrate that in your classrooms.'"

"Then you can stand up and sing about the land of the free."

And that, my Friends, is existing in paradox.

Such a great scene in the movie *The American President*.

To be an American citizen who espouses freedom is to live in paradox as described in that movie scene.

And a paradox is we didn't know is "a logically self-contradictory, absurd statement; a statement that runs contrary to one's expectation."

To be sure, we hear paradoxes all the time.

"This is the beginning of the end." That is paradoxical.

"Failure leads to success," is another.

"The more you learn, the more you realize how little you know."

"The person in control of a relationship is the person who is least emotionally invested in the relationship."

"The only certainty is that nothing is ever certain."

So on and so forth. Our reality is filled with endless paradoxes.

We exist in paradox. We live, and move, and have our being in paradox.

PAUSE

And then there was Martin Luther.

Who, if we didn't know, seemed to thrive on paradoxes.

Luther seemed to relish the notion of paradox.

Luther, who said things like:

"The Christian is both simultaneously sinner and saint."

And who said, "The Bible contains both law and gospel."

And who said, "God is REVEALED in Jesus Christ. And yet God's ultimate power is HIDDEN in suffering, especially hidden in the cross."

Yes, Luther loved his paradoxes.

Luther loved reality where reality was a “both/and” proposition.

A Christian is both sinner AND saint.

The bible contains both law AND gospel.

God is both the revealed God in Jesus Christ AND yet the hidden power of God is the Christ’s cross.

No, reality for Luther was never, or hardly ever an “either/or” proposition.

Again, think of that scene from *The American President*.

Free speech is BOTH you yelling at the top your lungs what it is you espouse AND another person yelling the opposite of what it is you espouse, at that top of their lungs.

The land of the free is BOTH the symbol of the flag AND a citizen of this land exercising their right to burn that flag in protest.

Again, that is paradox. That is what it means to exist, to live, and move, and to have our being in paradox.

PAUSE

And I bring all this up today because in our reading from I Corinthians, the apostle Paul is reminding the early Christian believers living there in Corinth, and reminding us some two thousand years later...

The apostle Paul is reminding us of what it is to exist in paradox.

There in that reading, Paul says, “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are beneficial. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be dominated by anything.”

That quote “All things are lawful,” had become a sort of slogan for this Church in Corinth.

That quote “All things are lawful,” was a sort of maxim by which the Christians there in Corinth lived.

“All things are lawful” was their go-to vision statement.

Which is why translations of the Greek here usually put this quote in quotation marks.

The original Greek language did not use quotation marks, like we do.

There is nothing in the original Greek text to suggest that this is a quote, so as to say Paul is claiming, “Some people say, QUOTE ‘All things are lawful’” ENDQUOTE.

There is nothing in the original Greek text to suggest Paul is quoting here.

It is an assumption made by later translators of the Greek. And a correct assumption, I would say.

Yes, it is a correct assumption that this saying “All things are lawful” had become the vision statement of the Church in Corinth.

And the person who probably first spouted this quote is none other than the apostle Paul himself.

PAUSE

You see, Paul’s gospel, his proclamation to would-be Christians... his gospel is that none of us can by ourselves, none of us are able by our own effort, to save ourselves.

Trying to follow God’s will perfectly, trying to fulfill God’s law perfectly, will not result in our salvation, because we will always fall short.

Jesus alone has perfectly fulfilled God’s will, he alone has perfectly done what the law of God requires...

Jesus was perfectly obedient to God’s will by dying on the cross, and so it is Christ Jesus and the power of the cross that saves us.

And so, we are free of the demands of God’s law.

And so, yes, all things are lawful.

But the problem in Corinth is that the Christians in Corinth are abusing that freedom in Christ.

They think that everything is permissible.

They think that they can NOW do whatever they like whenever they want to, and that there are no consequences.

Because Christ has freed them, “all things are lawful.”

You see, the problem is that the Christians in Corinth have committed themselves to only half of the paradox.

It would be like hearing “The Christian is a sinner,” without also hearing “and a saint.”

That “the Bible contains law,” without also hearing, “and gospel.”

That “God is revealed in Christ,” without also hearing, “God’s power is hidden in the cross.”

The Christians in Corinth has subscribed to only half of the paradox, and so, Paul needs to correct their mistake.

Which is why he tells them:

“Yes, all things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.”

“Yes, all things are lawful, but we are not to be dominated by anything.”

PAUSE

Now, a little later in this same letter, in chapter 10, verses 23 and following, Paul comes back to this quote.

And Paul says, in reference to this paradox, “Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”

“Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other.”

And that is really what is at the heart of this paradox.

You see, it is about how we use our freedom as Christians.

Now, Martin Luther summed up Christian freedom this way.

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

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

But, how can we be both at the same time?

How can we be both lord of all and servant of all?

Again, it is a paradox. We exist in paradox. We live, and move, and have our being in paradox.

But, again what Luther is getting at is “How do we use our freedom as a Christian?”

Now that we are saved...

Now that nothing holds any power over us, not sin, nor death, nor the devil...

Now that we are free, how do use our freedom?

Do we abuse it, like the Christians in Corinth and say, “Yippee, all things are lawful.”

Or, do we stop and think about how our actions, our words, our lifestyle, our behavior...

Do we stop and think about how our very existence impacts others around us?

For with great freedom comes great responsibility. Let me say that again, for with great freedom comes great responsibility.

Eleanor Roosevelt is usually credited with this idea.

She said, “Freedom makes a huge requirement of every human being. With freedom comes responsibility.”

But, in truth, Luther said it in a different way well before Eleanor Roosevelt, and the apostle Paul said it well before Martin Luther in his letter to the Corinthians.

But the point is the same. Freedom itself is paradoxical.

Freedom actually obligates us, freedom compels us to be responsible to each other.

Do not seek your own advantage, says Paul, but that of the other.

Do not abuse your freedom for selfish means.

“If you are free,” Paul says, “It only means that you have an obligation to the other person.”

Now, Paul was truly revolutionary in his thinking here.

And Paul will take this thought on Christina freedom even further.

In his letter to the Philippians, he writes these words, "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus."

Let the same mind be in you that was in Jesus Christ.

For, of course, Jesus who was lord of all, but he humbled himself and became servant of all.

Jesus looked to the interests of others before his own, such that he gave his life for all on the cross.

PAUSE

Yes, sisters and brothers in Christ, there is no greater paradox than for us to consider the interests of others before our own, for that is what Jesus did.

And there is no greater paradox than for us to consider others as better than ourselves.

How absurd is that, right? But this is the example of Jesus.

And so, we can't get around this. We can't avoid this.

We exist in paradox. We live, and move, and have our being in paradox.

We have been made free in Christ, we exist in freedom, so that we now have a great responsibility to be servants to others.

All things are lawful, but not all things are beneficial.

That which is beneficial is that which blesses our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.