

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another. But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

“Free at last, Free at last, Thank God almighty we are free at last.”

Those words from the iconic, “I have a dream” speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. (not to be confused with Martin Luther!) were spoken in 1963 during a civil rights march in Washington, DC and have become seared into the consciousness of many people. The idea of freedom is a powerful thought in our society as a whole. We are coming up to our celebration of Canada Day, and with it a recognition of the freedom we enjoy in this land. While we may not focus on that aspect of freedom as do our American neighbours with their celebration of Independence Day, we have become more entrenched in the thoughts of freedom than ever before. Now our idea of freedom focuses on individual and personal “rights.” As attractive as this sounds, it can, in fact, result in an undisciplined surrender to whatever impulse is the most urgent at the moment. “For so many, freedom means we should be free to do as we please, as long as it doesn’t hurt anyone else. We should be free to express ourselves in any way we want. “I have the right to choose” is the mantra of our world today.

In our text today, Paul speaks to us of freedom. In fact, he declares quite emphatically: *“For freedom Christ has set us free”*. Yet as we read all of our text we may get a very different feeling about that freedom. In the opening verse of our text Paul warns against becoming a slave again. As we go on in this text there are other words that make us wonder about this freedom—words like ‘serve’ and ‘law’, and even the word ‘crucified’. He ends with an exhortation that we are to *walk by the Spirit*. He is not saying that we should walk beside the Spirit, but that we are to be led by the Spirit. If someone else is doing the leading, then are we really free?

“For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” We tend to have a misguided idea of freedom. We often talk about free will. Yes, we do have freedom when it comes to some of the things of this world. We can choose Ford or GM, Mac or PC, Apple or Android. We have the freedom to have pizza, rather than soup for supper. We are even free to choose what we want on that pizza.

But did you hear what Paul said: *do not submit again to a yoke of slavery?* There was a time when we were slaves and it is easy to fall back into that slavery. The slavery that Paul focusses on has bound us all since Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, bringing sin into our world. Jesus says it very clearly: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.”* (John 8:34, ESV) One of Luther’s greatest works is a treatise entitled, “The Bondage of the Will”. As Scripture itself teaches, the human will is bound. We are all sinners. As sinners, we are slaves to sin. We cannot free ourselves. That’s a hard concept for us to accept. We like freedom. We boast of our freedom. We want to see ourselves playing some part in our salvation. We want to think we are free to choose God over sin, the same way we would choose pizza over soup. But we are slaves to sin. We don’t have that freedom.

Thanks be to God that when Jesus told the people that everyone who sins is a slave to sin, He also made a glorious promise: *“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”* (John 8:36, ESV) Our freedom comes because Christ freely chose to become Man, to suffer, die, and rise for us. The catechism says that Christ has redeemed us; that He has *“purchased and won me from*

all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.” (SC, 2nd Article)

My dear people, loved by God, you are free, indeed! Our slavery has ended. The devil is defeated. Where there was only doom and gloom, fear and death, there is now life and hope and salvation. We are free from the bondage that sin brings to us; free from the condemning power of the law, which brings both death in this world and the eternal death of hell; free from the devil and his temptations. We are free so that we may live the victorious life which is ours in Christ. Paul tells us that since we are free through Christ and His death on the cross, we are not to submit as slaves again. We, who know the hope that we have through the resurrection of Christ, must always live in that life in Christ.

But do we live the victorious life of freedom we have in Christ? There are many who think that freedom in Christ is freedom to do whatever we want. Because we are free, we don't have to worry about the law. Because we are free, we can choose for ourselves what we will or won't do. Paul says we do not use our ***freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another***. Our freedom can become an excuse to satisfy our sinful desires. Then we tell ourselves that we're okay, because we can just ask God to forgive us, and He'll let us off the hook. What we don't always realize is that when we take freedom as a license to do anything and everything, then we've really become slaves again. What we think is freedom becomes an opportunity for the flesh—and for the devil, who so eagerly wants to see us under his control again.

Paul says that we are free *through* Christ, so that we can live *in* Christ. The joy of our victory in Christ brings a wonderful new life to us. Earlier in this epistle, Paul said: ***“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*** (Galatians 2:20, ESV) He echoes that thought in our text, as he says: ***those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires***. Our freedom is not freedom to do whatever we want; rather it is freedom from all that would hurt or shame or disappoint. Our freedom is not so that we can live any way we please, but that we may live the full life that we have in Christ. This is the life that is free, indeed! That life in Christ is reflected in our love for God and love for our neighbour. It is a life led by the Spirit. When we were slaves of sin, our every thought, word and action always fell far short of God's glory. But now, in Christ, we are free to be the kind of people God created and redeemed us to be. Our lives of sin were focussed on all those works of the flesh that Paul listed: ***sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these***. But the victorious and free life is filled with fruit of the Spirit. Now we can bring forth ***love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control***. Alive in Christ, we live to show that Christ lives in us.

It is our tradition here at Foothills to gather on the front lawn of the church on the Sunday closest to Canada Day to pray for our country and to sing *“O Canada”*. As we sing our national anthem, we pray: “God, keep our land glorious and free”. We are blessed and privileged to have the freedoms we enjoy in this land. Our freedom is a cause for celebration. It has often been said that Canadians are subdued about their lives as Canadians. I'm not sure that is always true. We do show that we are proud Canadians. Many homes display the flag. We do have our maple leaf emblem on our shirts and ball caps and jackets. We wear pins that declare we are Canadian. And we drink coffee from Tim Horton's, eat back-bacon and enjoy maple syrup because we are Canadian.

We have an even greater reason to celebrate, as we remember and rejoice in our freedom in Christ. When we look at the lives of the apostles, and of God's faithful through the ages, we see the pride, the joy, the excitement they had in this new life of freedom. With the help of the Holy Spirit, they left the life of sin to serve God and love their neighbours. They went out into the world with boldness and conviction; even facing the persecution, revulsion and hatred of the world to be known as Christians. Sometimes they felt like Elijah, who said: ***“I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”*** (1 Kings 19:10, ESV) Yet they were glad to heed the call that we heard from Christ in our Gospel lesson today: ***“Follow me.”*** (Luke 9:59, ESV) In that glorious life of freedom they proclaimed Christ. In that victorious life, they boasted in Christ. They were not ashamed to be known as Christians, as those who follow Christ. And while they were truly free, they often call themselves slaves of Christ.

Were they free? In Christ, yes, indeed! We share in that same life. Be bold and confident of who you are in Christ. Live the victorious, free life, knowing that ***“those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”*** Amen.