

“True Freedom”

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“You’re not the boss of me!” Have you ever said that? I’m sure I did once upon a time. I would like to think it’s an old line that only kids say (and young ones at that), but I’m not so sure anymore. It feels like I hear this saying almost daily in recent times. On this weekend when we celebrate the freedom, we think we’ve found, I find myself examining exactly what I think that freedom is.

As a people (and I’m talking the people of the United States here) we seem to have fallen into this trap – that freedom means doing what I want. In the rugged individualism we hold in high esteem, it also applies to *personal* freedom. I can do what I want, and freedom applies to me – I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about YOUR freedom, or HIS freedom, or OUR freedom.

We lose a great deal when we subscribe to this limited understanding of freedom. We lose our collective identity as God’s people. If we claim that status, if we claim to be God’s, a person of faith, a Christian, then freedom is not only broader than this view we’ve examined, it also includes mutual accountability to be truly free. I am not free if you are not free. You are not free, if I am not free. That’s how God’s freedom works.

I cannot do whatever I want – at least not without consequences. And ultimately, we’re accountable to God for how we live, for what we do and leave undone, for what we say and what goes unsaid. But God also created us to live in community, with accountability not only to God, but to each other. We can help each other live into our God-given freedom if we will allow it.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Galatians 5:13-14: “you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don’t let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: **Love your neighbor as yourself.** But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don’t get eaten up by each other!”

“Love your neighbor as yourself.” Even in a culture such as ours, where individualism is so highly prized, it is impossible to read or hear this command without realizing that my freedom is intertwined with your freedom. And vice versa.

Walter Brueggemann, in his book: **Journey to the Common Good**, says that it is the Exodus story that gives us a clue on how to get to the true freedom of love and mutual accountability in God. When people are living lives dominated by anxiety and scarcity, they aren’t likely to seek the common good; they’re going to be too busy trying to survive – like the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. But when God uses Moses to lead the people out of what Brueggemann defines as “the anxiety system” of Egypt, God produces manna demonstrating divine generosity and abundance.

But as we see in this story in the Bible, the people didn’t find it easy to move from a system of scarcity to one of abundance overnight. They were in the wilderness – not some ideal place – and the abundance they were experiencing was entirely God’s grace. But it is the generosity of God’s grace that redefines a place. Can we let God’s grace redefine our place?

The book goes on to argue that in order for us today to experience the true freedom of this story, we must also make a departure. Maybe not from a literal Pharaoh, but certainly from the anxiety systems we find ourselves occupying in this 21st century.

If living in a culture on anxiety and scarcity and “me first” means we cannot and will not look for the common good, then we must flip that culture. When we experience God’s generosity and abundance and recognize it for the grace that it is, we are freed up to be good neighbors and to seek the common good.

I believe we as God’s people can be about the work of making this shift happen. Jesus says to us, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” As his followers, isn’t our freedom bound up in making this happen?

Finally, perhaps my favorite way of saying all this comes in the form of a quote from poet Maya Angelou: “While I know myself as a creation of God, I am also obligated to realize and remember that everyone else and everything else are also God’s creation.”

I believe that in this great experiment we call our country, we as children of God can be an integral part of making this happen. Then, we may truly live in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” Please God, may it be so. Amen.