

“Chosen to Be Truly Free”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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John 15:9-17

All children, some more than others, resent their parents. From toddler through teenage years, tantrums erupt, in part because no parent is perfect, but largely because we want to be free to do as we please. We chafe at the limits imposed and dream of the days when we’ll be big enough and old enough to make our own choices without the interference of rules that can seem so arbitrary, especially when they are justified with the words, “because I said so.” Even into our adult years, there can be tension, friction. A parent stays a parent, a child always a child, and most of us spend most of our lives being both at the same time.

There’s nothing wrong with any of this. In fact, it is natural and necessary and healthy. A good parent wants what’s best for their child, which means saying from time to time “No, you can’t,” or “Yes, you must.” Only a child yearning to be free can reach maturity and assume responsibility.

Yet the impulse a child feels to be independent and unconstrained, the parent’s desire to exert control, both wanting to have their own way, can disrupt our relationship with God, because God is our Father. We are His children, and He commands us to obey, and we resent that, maybe not all of the time, but enough to cause problems.

Our resentment emerges from the idea that the four-letter words “free” and “obey” are fundamentally opposed, mutually exclusive, and to a certain extent, that’s true, until you add a third four-letter word, “love,” which reconciles the contradiction between “free” and “obey.” With love at the center, we can obey and be fully free simultaneously, because obeying God aligns us with the only freedom that’s real.

The freedom to do what we want when we want, that's fake freedom, a knock-off that leads to nowhere except sin and spiritual death. But real freedom, the type that's released by God's love and received by us in humble obedience, leads to victory over fear and despair, victory over lies and hate, victory over loneliness and isolation.

The victory of loving obedience brings more than fame or trophies or money, or even a big garland of roses, wonderful as those things are. The victory of Jesus, a victory won by the one human being who's ever been fully free, because he loved and obeyed perfectly, that victory makes our joy complete. It empowers us to abide in the peace of Jesus's love and inspires us to bear fruit that will last. What more could we want?

But it's not always easy. Nothing worthwhile ever is. Just ask Jesus. He took the initiative and chose us, knowing that we might not choose him back; knowing our fake, selfish freedom might fool us and make us reject him, and we all know how much rejection stings.

He lovingly gave up his life so that we might live lovingly, and he did it in the most astonishing, scandalous way. He chose freely in obedience to his Father's Will to endure great humiliation and agony, with no guarantee it would work, just faith in God's prevenient grace to awaken in our hearts an awareness that there's something better, something more to life than simply doing what you want when you want the way you want.

Jesus chose us, hoping that we would choose him in return, and by choosing him that we would choose to love whomever he chooses to love, which is everyone, rather than selecting from a small collection of people we deem worthy to receive our love. Jesus chose us to follow him, to lay down our lives, not precisely in the same way he did, but in a sacrificial way that's real and meaningful, that gives without the expectation of benefit apart from the sheer joy of giving.

Jesus chose us, without regard for our flaws and failures, so that we might be free to experience catharsis, a self-emptying, that makes room for God's abundant grace to flow more freely and fully through our hearts. Jesus chose us to serve as witnesses to the truth that scarcity is a lie, that there's plenty to go around if we sacrifice the sinful sort of freedom that makes us frightened and hateful and selfish and greedy. Jesus came and called us so that we might be shaken free from the false ideas of liberty that cause us to cower from the radical nature of what being a disciple of Jesus means.

Jesus chose us to choose others, to be loved and to love, to embrace obedience as the Way of life that leads to freedom from resentment, to the forgiveness of sin that erases regret and heals shame, to reconciliation with God and with others that ignites love as the motivating force in our lives. Jesus chose us to receive grace and the spiritual gifts to bear fruit that will last, to feel his joy and abide in his peace. What more could we want? There is no other victory, no matter how great, that could possibly compare, and it's right there within our reach just waiting to be accepted.

So what are we waiting for, a better deal? There's none to be had. A freedom that's not costly? It doesn't exist. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "Grace is free, but not cheap." Are we waiting to find a way to escape from godly obedience? That's a fantasy that wastes our time and risks our lives. Open up, reach out, and receive. Want to be really free? Here's our chance, the only chance. Amen.

