

Set Free to Serve Willingly

Service held at Clarinda Lutheran School

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: The great reformer Martin Luther, in a popular essay entitled *On Christian Freedom*, made this remarkable statement: “A Christian is [on one hand] the most free lord of all, and subject to no one; [and on the other] a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to everyone.” Got that? You are both the master and the bound servant of all. That doesn’t make much sense, does it? The two parts of his thesis seem to be mutually exclusive; but they’re not. And Luther spends the rest of the essay explaining how both parts are absolutely true.

The idea is essentially this: You have been set free from sin, death, and the power of the devil by Christ. You rest in his accomplished work on the cross where he suffered and died for your sins. As a result, the Law can no longer condemn you. You owe nothing to anyone – Christ did it all for you. More than that, through your Baptism you’ve been made a child of God, a member of his royal family, and an heir of his everlasting kingdom. Yes, even now you live and reign with Christ. And there is nothing on this earth and no physical condition you might endure; not poverty or wealth, good fortune or bad, and no condition of sickness or health that can deprive you of it. You are free. And while this is all true, yet, at the same time, having been redeemed by Jesus and filled with his Spirit – and given a new nature that delights in Christ-like behavior and living the life of Christian love – in joy and thanksgiving you want to serve your neighbor. Just as Jesus set aside his Lordship and heavenly glory, and came to this earth to serve and to save the lost, so also we who are free in Christ willingly set aside our rights privileges to serve others. And in truth, only someone who has been set free of the law by Christ can actually fulfill it by showing the voluntary self-sacrificial love that the Law requires.

This is what Paul is saying to the church at Corinth in this morning’s Epistle. And to fully grasp what he’s saying, it’s helpful to know that he’s building on what we heard in last week’s Epistle. Then he was addressing the issue of eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. Let me explain: Corinth is in Greece, where, as you might expect, most of the people used to worship the Greek gods. The city was full of temples to Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Diana, Ares, and the rest of that mythological pantheon. And the primary way people worshipped these gods was to bring them offerings – usually animals that were sacrificed to please the gods and gain their favor. The carcasses of these animals would be laid on the altars with the thought that the gods were able to feast upon them in a spiritual sort of way. And this happened all day long. Lots of folks brought the gods offerings, so each beast was only laid on the altar for a brief period to make room for the next sacrifice. So what happened to all the dead animals removed from the altars? The priests took them to market to sell to the butchers who, in turn, cut them up and sold the meat to grocery shoppers. This is how the pagan priests got paid and how they raised money to keep up their temples. But the upshot was that if you lived in Corinth and wanted to buy some nice lamb chops or a pot roast for dinner, the chances were very high that the meat had been first sacrificed to an idol.

This led to a controversy in the Christian church there. The issue was this: was it okay for Christians to eat this meat? Or was it somehow contaminated or made unholy because of what had been done to it? The more mature Christians, those who had had the time to work out the implications of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, understood that it didn’t really matter where the meat had been. So what if some poor benighted pagan sacrificed it to Zeus? There is no Zeus.

The meat is just meat. Why should some other guy's silly superstition prevent me from enjoying my supper? We are free in Christ to eat whatever we want. And that's true.

But others, usually newcomers to the faith, weren't so sure. It had only been a short time ago that they were offering such sacrifices to the false gods themselves. They likely had family members and friends who still were, and it grieved them. And now, having been set free from that whole idea of having constantly to try to earn the favor of the false gods, they hated what they used to do. To them it was just evil. The result was that they *did* tend to think of those sacrifices as being unfit for Christians to eat. And this is important: if you think something is sinful to do, even if it's not a sin from God's perspective, by doing it you are sinning against God because you are violating your conscience. If you believe you are committing a sinful act, then you are in rebellion.

The problem arose when newer Christians observed mature Christians buying and eating this meat. It may have caused them to think, "Well, if it's okay for them, I guess maybe it's okay for me too" – even though they still have grave reservations and really didn't think so in their hearts. With this in mind Paul warned the more mature Christians to be careful. He said don't let your Christian freedom to eat that meat destroy the souls of your brothers and sisters for whom Christ died. If the exercise of your freedom might lead someone else to sin, then you are no longer free to do whatever it is. Concern for your fellow Christians who might be tempted to sin and thus fall and be destroyed demands that you set aside your freedom. Emphasizing this, Paul concluded with these words: if my eating meat might lead someone else to sin, then I'll never eat meat again.

Now obviously in our day, we're not dealing with this same issue. The meat you buy at the store wasn't sacrificed to any god other than the almighty dollar. But the same general principle applies. Love demands that you surrender your freedom to serve the greater good of others. For example, you are free in Christ (if you are of age) to enjoy alcohol in moderation. But if you invite someone who struggles with alcoholism to your Superbowl party, then the only beer in the house better be on the Budweiser ads on TV. Likewise if you're serving a dinner for someone who's got problems controlling his or her appetite and has all the health complications that go with it, then you ought not serve deep fried triple-bacon burgers with chips and chocolate cheesecake for dessert. Though you are free to eat or drink whatever you want, your love for others says it's wrong to place temptation before them that might lead them to sin or to physical harm. And this goes far beyond food issues. Knowing that men in general are visually stimulated and that they are subject to lustful thoughts, tells Christian women that though they're free to wear whatever they want (or not), yet, for the sake of their brothers in Christ they ought to dress modestly.

In today's text, Paul expands on this idea by citing a personal example. He reminds the church at Corinth that while he was with them serving as an evangelist and their first pastor, he had the right to be paid for his work. Yes, that's right, the preacher has to eat and have a roof over his head too; and it's the duty of those who are benefiting from his ministry to support him (and his family if he's got one). But while Paul was in Corinth, he set aside his right to be paid. He didn't accept any money from the congregation. He was supported instead by working part time as a tent maker and he also received what we would call mission money from other churches in Greece and Macedonia. Why didn't he want the Corinthians to pay him? It was because he didn't want anyone there to think that he was in it only for the money. He was concerned that it might become an obstacle to someone coming to the faith.

You see, Corinth was not very far from Athens, which was the intellectual and philosophical capital of the ancient world. If you had some brand new brilliant idea you wanted

the world to hear, that was the place to go teach it. And so, if you visited Athens, you could hear philosophers spouting forth with all kinds of strange ideas. And if you liked what one of them had to say, you could become one of his students or disciples; but you had to pay for the privilege. That's how the philosophers survived: on money given to them by their students. My guess is though, that if a philosopher couldn't hack it in Athens where the culturally elite were because his ideas just weren't that popular or well thought out, he might make a go of it in nearby Corinth where the citizens naturally wanted to think that they were just as wise as sophisticated as the Athenians. Or to say if another way, when it came to teachers of new philosophies who were hungry to gather students to themselves, Corinth got Athens's rejects. The result was that the typical citizen of Corinth would be "on guard", shall we say, and inclined to be very skeptical of what a philosopher hoping to be paid for his teaching was saying.

Therefore it was necessary for Paul to make it absolutely clear that he wasn't one of those guys. Paul knew that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the message of life in a dying world. It's light for those in the darkness. He had to preach it. The love of Christ in him to save the lost compelled him to do so. And to make the message that much more clear to the jaded Corinthians – that he was doing it for the sake of love and not for monetary gain – he says, I set aside my right to be paid in order to win more souls for Christ. And that was my reward, he says, that I was able to show Christ's love by preaching the Gospel free of charge to you. Showing Christian love is its own reward.

And from that point Paul goes on to explain that he did whatever was in his power to reach people where they were and clear away obstacles that might have prevented them from giving the Gospel of Christ an honest hearing. "To the Jews I became as a Jew." Though Paul had been set free from all the rituals and dietary restrictions the Jews observed, when he sat down with Jews he too scrupulously followed all their rules. He didn't want to offend them and thus cause them to be inclined not to take him seriously. Likewise, when he sat down with Gentiles who ate things that he, raised as a strict Pharisee, spent the bulk of his life rejecting as unclean and unfit to eat – things that formerly would have made him sick to even think about eating – he didn't let it bother him a bit. "Hey, these pork ribs are great. Now, let me tell you about Jesus." Paul says, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some." And again, we understand that he's presenting this as an example of how a Christian person though free to do many things, yet for the sake of love surrenders his or her freedom to serve the good of others.

And this is where he makes the application to us using the analogy of athletes in training. The Corinthians would have understood very well what was involved in training for the Olympic Games – the Greeks invented them, after all. And we too understand because we've all heard the stories of what modern athletes need to do and how hard they have to train if they want to compete in the Olympics. Every moment of every day they're disciplining themselves with but one goal in mind. But Paul says you know even though there are many competitors, in the end, only one athlete can with the prize – and a perishable one at that: a crown of laurel leaves that soon fades away. But you are in training for the ultimate prize: a crown of glory that never fades. Therefore all the more you must discipline yourself: learning from Christ the law of love – learning to kill that old, sinful nature in you that always wants to say, "What about me? What about my rights? What about my freedoms?" Learning to confess those thoughts and feelings for the sins of selfishness they are. And receiving again Christ's sure word of forgiveness, purchased for you by his complete sacrifice of himself, going forth guided by his Spirit ready, willing, and able to serve others even a Christ serves you.

What does that look like? It can look like a lot of things: wherever there are opportunities to share Christ and his love; but I think we have a good example of it right here today. I'm

speaking of this Christian school. I mean, why does it exist? There are other schools around – good schools that we already pay for with our taxes. Why don't we just use them? The answer is because there are a lot of Christian people around here guided by the Holy Spirit who want to do what's in their power to ensure that the children of this community have the greatest opportunity to build their lives on the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And these same people are willing to make sacrifices – sacrifices of their time, their talents, and their treasures in order to provide that opportunity. This school exists, in short, because we have been set free in Christ to serve willingly. And so it stands as a testimony of the ongoing work of Christ in our lives.

May the Lord Jesus continue this work in us in all aspects of our lives, that every day, in our homes, at our work, and in our recreation, by dying to self and rising with him to new life, we may be free to serve the entire family of God – to whom be our praise and thanks forever. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!