

“Escape or Entrance: Which Way to Freedom?”

Scripture: Galatians 5: 1, 13 - 25

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Today we remember America’s prophet, Martin Luther King, who was born on this day, in 1929. Were he alive today, Dr. King would have been only 83.

I’ll never forget, when I was a Teaching Assistant in a class at Harvard, our head professor, William Graham, was lecturing to this huge class about the religious roots of the civil rights movement. Bill Graham is a rather dry and fastidious intellectual, and yet, as he read these words of Dr. King’s, he broke down and cried:

‘ . . .when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every . . .village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children . . .will be able to **join hands** and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"'

Why did Bill Graham cry, as he read these words? I think he was crying because there was some place in his life that needed freedom, and Dr. King’s words opened that pain, and envisioned that hope. There was some thing in his experience – whether it was at work, in his family, or in society – that still was waiting to be freed.

And us too. No matter how together we might seem, there is some part of our life that needs freedom. It might be part of our life that is somewhat private, even secret -- such as a bitterness toward another person; or a habitual, “just one more drink” that leaves us a little too numbed each night; or a shadow of anxiety that darkens each morning upon awakening. We may hunger for freedom in our public lives, stuck in a prison cell created by our culture, with no good way out – such as working a job in place that has lost its sense of higher purpose; or getting lost in debt to a system rigged to hurt the unsuspecting; or being a citizen voting, where our choices are limited to candidates who blatantly lie about their opponents. Dr. King awoke a hunger and a hope for freedom that speaks to our public and private lives -- a hunger and a hope that is so visceral, it can make us cry.

Yet, the reason that so many of us are not free is because there is a phantom form of freedom at large in our world, a phantom that looks like freedom, but it’s not. The Apostle Paul speaks about this, in today’s Scripture lesson. That phantom freedom is what I’ll call, “the freedom of escape.” In contrast, real freedom is Entrance – not Escape! Entrance! Entering into, Coming into. . . **a community**, where you realize your deeper freedom. This freedom of entrance was Dr. King’s goal. This is what The Apostle Paul also is talking about in today’s Scripture.

So, we'll contrast the Freedom of Entrance and the Freedom of Escape. And finally, I need to speak about the church. Our church can be that place of entrance to freedom. But it also has the power to hold us back.

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Dr. King was aware that many would be drawn to the Civil Rights movement who were angry and likely to react violently when provoked by the police or the white mob. He worried that any violent reaction would then be used against the movement, used to justify continuing segregation. One of the most important strategies he used, therefore, adopted from Mahatma Gandhi and India, was "self-purification." What this meant, in the American context, was that no one would be allowed to participate in the movement – in its marches, the sit-in's, or freedom bus-rides -- unless they had gone through intensive group training in non-violent resistance.

So, right from the start, Dr. King said that, in order to be free, one needed to enter a community – here, a training community. These training communities were run by the Highlander School and later the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Here, with the help of your group, you were trained to maintain an inner discipline. So, if the police bashed your head, you were trained to not lose your dignity and explode. If you were knocked over by fire hoses and police dogs, you were trained to lie still, without reacting. If you were arrested, you went peacefully to jail, and did not respond to taunts from your jailers.

If you were joining the movement to struggle for a life without violence and fear and unfair laws, then you had to have a **freedom from** violence and fear and injustice **already** in your **soul**. Dr. King linked the means and the ends – both freedom. You got civic freedom, by entering into a community that taught you inner freedom.

This was Dr. King's Freedom of Entrance.

Now, the Apostle Paul, back in the first century, was addressing a very different situation, but he also emphasized the Freedom of Entrance. Wherever Paul traveled, there were members of the new Christian community who said, you can't enter our community, unless you obey the Jewish laws. Or, you can't enter our community, unless you give up your Jewish practices! Paul continually confronted this conflict between Gentile and Jew. And so Paul repeatedly had to argue, No, No, No! You are FREE to enter this new community. No rules, no laws, no traditions can keep you from entering. Christ has *paid* your entrance fee!

And, what happens once you freely enter this new Christian community? Paul, on this point, is at his most mystical. Here, in this passage from Galatians, he says, Now you "walk by the Spirit!" Paul testifies that the Holy Spirit, within this community, changes hearts and minds. Paul writes in Galatians that this new Christian community is a mystical space, wherein we grow toward "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such there is no law."<sup>ii</sup>

Just like Dr. King, Paul argues that, if you want to be **really** free, you enter community – in this case, the church. Within this mystical community of the Holy Spirit, you are freed, acting now from a transformed heart.

Perhaps you don't have such a mystical notion of what happens in church. (My dad, a cranky Presbyterian, used to say, "Church is just, 'Stand up, sit down, sing a hymn, drink coffee brown.'") But we do see people among us who are changed, profoundly changed, by church. Paul would say, "That's the Holy Spirit." Some of us might say, "Well, that's the power of the support group, or the power of a good example." Perhaps we're just playing with labels here, because what matters is the **result, the outcome of this community**. Around us are people going from grace to grace, moving from less freedom to more freedom.

But, with all this talk about freedom, it's **easy to misunderstand**, and to replace Dr. King's and Paul's idea of freedom with another form of freedom, a phantom Freedom, the Freedom of ESCAPE. What is the Freedom of Escape?

The freedom of escape is **Ferris Bueller's Day Off**. This movie, from 1986, is a favorite around our house – so I don't know if any of this sermon will sink in with my kids – or my husband. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* shows a day in the life of a clever high school senior who skips school, and picks up his girlfriend and his best friend to join the fun. When his girlfriend asks him, "Ferris, what are we going to do today?" he answers: "The question isn't 'what are we going to do,' the question is 'what **aren't** we going to do?'" The Day Off becomes a chain reaction of mayhem: hacking into the school computer system to change Ferris's official record; joyriding in a Ferrari convertible, driving it into a big, downtown parade; and a final wild scheme to turn back the Ferrari's odometer, which goes terribly wrong, crashing the car through a glass wall, into a ravine.

The freedom of Escape – escape from parents, police officers and the vice-principal. It's funny, until you realize that you're an *adult*, but you still have the soul of Ferris Bueller.

The Apostle Paul, again and again, confronted Christians who thought Freedom was Escape. Galatians and Corinthians and the Book of Acts all detail conflicts around *Christian* Freedom. Many of the new Christians thought anything goes, anything was allowed them, because they were free! And so, in Galatians 5, we read Paul confronting people engaged in "sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; <sup>20</sup> idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions<sup>21</sup> and envy; drunkenness, and orgies," all under the banner of freedom.

Paul's argument against this libertine behavior isn't that it's just immoral – but it is; it isn't that it violates the law of Love – though it does. Paul says, this libertine behavior actually ensnares you, it holds you in bondage. In First Corinthians, for example, Paul writes: "Yes, yes, I have the freedom to do anything. . . All things are lawful to me, but I won't be enslaved!"<sup>iii</sup>

The freedom of escape leads you to enslavement – enslaved by the consequences of your behavior, controlled by the destructive fall-out of your freedom. We all know people who, using this phantom - freedom, have been left in bondage: alcoholic or alone, without spouse or friends, left with poor health or fired, or even, literally, in jail. (And that list just covers my side of the family!)

Throughout the history of philosophy there has been a long conversation about these two forms of freedom, what philosophers have called Positive Freedom and Negative Freedom. Positive freedom is freedom, constructed and fostered by a group; and Negative freedom is seen as the removal of socially constructed **barriers** to freedom. Which one is more fundamental to freedom?

Immanuel Kant, the founder of Enlightenment philosophy, took up this argument and came down on the side of . . . Positive Freedom, freedom that comes from entering community. Kant was convinced we couldn't find freedom by *ourselves*, by escaping from society. We need community, Kant argued, because, left to ourselves, we're prone to be self-indulgent, even self-deluding. Kant wrote, "**How can one expect to construct something completely straight out of such crooked wood?**"<sup>iv</sup> We're that crooked wood! We twist and bend ourselves, making excuses about our behavior, rationalizing our motivations.

How can we, crooked timbers grow up as straight trees, reaching toward sunlight, reaching toward freedom? Kant wrote that the answer was to place ourselves into a forest! A forest: where everything is compelled to grow upright, all reaching toward the sun together, toward freedom together.

And that forest was, for Kant, the church! Now, this is very surprising, because Kant spent all of his academic life dodging the censors of the church, having to hide or hedge his most radical insights. Yet, Kant believed in the power of the church in its ideal form, and that its ideals can lift up our lives. So Kant called the church, "a free, universal and enduring union of hearts,"<sup>v</sup> and a "community of insight."<sup>vi</sup>

Every day I come to First Congregational, I experience this growth in insight, in united hearts, and in freedom. One of the great parts of my job is pastoral visitation. I'll often go on pastoral calls with another member of our congregation, such as Jeff Standy, Joyce Shuberg, Cindy Domas, and Phyllis Smith. I find these calls to be an experience of the Holy Spirit. My pastoral calling team mates show such love and sensitivity and knowledge, as we make these visits, that I am lifted up! Truly the Holy Spirit is transforming me, making me a little better person because of this time with I spend with my pastoral calling partners.

But the people we visit especially lift me. I want to tell you about one of them -- Leo Reed. Leo is a retired pastor, a widower who lives at Capital Manor, caring about his cats and neighbors and the world. Leo exudes generosity and inner peace. To visit with Leo Reed is to be inspired in the literal sense of the word: the Holy Spirit breathes into you a new level of living. I find myself being pulled to a place that is a little closer to where Leo himself is, what the Apostle Paul described as: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control."

That's what can happen, in the community of the church.

But the church can also be a place where **freedom doesn't grow**, where our crooked timbers grow even more twisted.

Leo Reed told me such a story, and gave me permission to share it with you:

Leo's first church was a small congregation, just 14 women really, the only ones who showed up regularly to worship. Even among those 14 women, there were icy, argumentative factions. One of them

showed up on his parsonage porch, just as he was coming home after his first Sunday service, and warned him, "You've just accepted a call to the worst possible church!"

The initial salary was \$30 a month, and Leo was always worried about making ends meet for his young family. The trustees – all men who didn't even come to worship regularly – were suspicious and miserly with the money Leo needed to run the parsonage. They questioned the smallest purchases, including light bulbs, asking to see the old light bulbs, so that they could be sure they were truly burnt out.

As Leo settled into the church, he was told a story about a previous pastor, from 15 years earlier. This pastor had asked permission of the Ladies Fellowship to use their sterling table ware when he was planning to host a gathering of clergy. His request was refused, but he went ahead anyway and set the tables with the sterling and then went next door, to convene his meeting. Sometime that day the sterling tableware disappeared. The pastor was accused of being the thief, and was turned out from his post.

Well, one day Leo was at the home of an elderly church member, and she asked him to help build a fire in her wood stove. Leo went out to the woodbox, and there, at the bottom of the woodbox was a silverware storage chest. Leo took the silver chest out and brought it to the woman. Then the story spilled out. When she had heard that the pastor was setting the table with the sterling, defying the Ladies' Fellowship, she went to the church and removed the silver from the set tables, took it home. Then, as this pastor was being accused of stealing the silver, she didn't reveal that she had it. She kept this secret for 15 years.

A prison cell, lurking deep within in the soul of this church, had been uncovered. For years, an inner circle of members had been trapped and imprisoned -- in suspicion, miserliness, factionalism and lies; and none of them could be free. This woman's secret had locked the cell door.

Do we have a silver chest, hidden in our hearts, hindering – not just OUR growth toward freedom, but hindering this church? We may not be able to bring the freedom of God's spirit to one another in this place, because we are not yet free. Our hearts may hold a silver chest of resentment, anxiety, cynicism.

There's one more point to this story of the silver chest. Leo wondered aloud to me if the woman with the silver chest *foresaw* that he would find it. He wondered if she actually *planned* that he would find the silverware chest in the wood box. For all these years, for her own sake, for her own peace of mind, she didn't have the motivation to lift it out. But now, for the sake of *another*, she was ready. For the sake of Leo's ministry, she was ready to remove the silver chest.

Leo Reed lifted out that silver chest, and so can we: we lift it up, and bring it out, submit it to the freeing power of the Holy Spirit. And, if not for our own sake, then, for the sake of others: for the sake of our friends here, for the sake of our children who worship here, for the sake of the newcomer who has decided to give church a chance.

Enter the church. Enter the home of the Holy Spirit. And, enter Freedom. Here is the freedom of entrance. Here you enter, and join hands, as Dr. King said, singing the words of the old spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

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<sup>i</sup> Martin Luther King, "I have a Dream," August 28, 1963

<sup>ii</sup> Galatians 5: 22 – 23

<sup>iii</sup> 1 Cor 6: 12

<sup>iv</sup> Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone, (Cambridge University Press), p. 111.

<sup>v</sup> "(The church) could best . . . be likened to a . . . family. . . under a common though invisible moral father, whose holy son. . . knows the father's will, and . . . (is yet) in (a) blood relation with all the members of the family. (The son) . . . mak( ths)e other members better acquainted with (the father's) will; . . . and (they) thus enter into a free, universal and enduring union of hearts."<sup>v</sup> Op cit, page 112.

<sup>vi</sup> Op cit, page 156.