

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, NC
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True Freedom
Acts 16:16-34

What is freedom?

It's a simple question, but I'd venture a guess that if you asked 10 different people, you'd get 10 different answers. A woman serving time in prison longs for freedom from her cell, the ability to walk outside, to set her own schedule, to be with her own family, to sleep in her own bed.

A couple raising a family on a tight budget with tens of thousands of dollars in debt yearns for financial freedom and relief from the ever-present burden of their limited resources.

A recent high school graduate can practically taste the freedom that is to come when he is in charge of his days and nights, free from the rules and limitations of childhood, viewed and accepted as an adult.

All around us people yearn for freedom- from addiction and disease, from abuse and oppression, from expectations and limitations, from life under the grip of poverty, misunderstanding and violence.

Freedom takes on many forms, and it is a concept very close to our hearts as Americans.

In three days we will celebrate our most important national holiday. On the Fourth of July each year, Americans deck themselves out in red, white and blue, participate in parades, display the flag and watch fireworks to honor the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. On that day our country declared its freedom, and every subsequent year, we remember and celebrate the precious gift that we enjoy as citizens of this country.

On a national level, freedom means that we have the ability to choose our leaders, and articulate our opinions about issues. It means we can gather in groups to practice our religion and protest our government without fear of government-sanctioned persecution. Freedom, in a democracy, gives us the ability to live our lives as we see fit, within the parameters of established laws. Our freedom, sought by our forefathers and mothers and won at the cost of countless human lives, is an acknowledgement of our right as individuals to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

This kind of freedom is precious, and is not something enjoyed by everyone on this planet. The five church members traveling this month to Russia are going to be with our brothers and sisters in faith who are not free to practice their religion, and who face persecution of a variety of sorts just for being Christian. Sometimes we forget just how precious our freedom really is.

And as much as we value it, sometimes we lose sight of what it really means.

Consider these lyrics from popular music: “I’m free to do what I want, any old time...”¹ “I’m as free as a bird now, and this bird will never change.”² “You’re free. Make your own decisions. You live your life and let me live mine.”³

Nothing inherently offensive or wrong with any of that language. Freedom is a good thing and if people want to sing about it, more power to them. But the underlying message there is something that should give us pause as people of faith seeking to live freely in obedience to God’s will. In his commentary on this passage, Will Willmon says, “There is freedom, and then there is freedom.”

If freedom means that I can do whatever I want to do, and no one can tell me otherwise, then it ceases to be about a larger purpose and quickly becomes a selfish pursuit. When our approach to opposition in any form is to reply by saying, “you can’t tell me what to do, it’s a free country!” then we are manipulating a powerful force that is meant for the betterment of all people and using it for our own purposes. When our personal freedom becomes our ultimate goal, our greatest prize, our only concern, we are treading on dangerous ground. We are making freedom about ourselves as individuals- our own needs, wants and desires- and not about ourselves as a community of people of differing views and opinions created by one God who desires unity and peace.

It is far too easy for us who live with freedom as a given to take it for granted. When we see freedom in every form as our inherent right and become so focused on insuring our freedom *from* something, we can easily forget that freedom always calls us *to* something as well. As the saying goes, with freedom comes responsibility. Whether as individuals or as a nation, if we forget that, we cheapen the freedom that is at the heart of our very identity.

In the 16th chapter of Acts, we find a succinct and powerful statement on freedom that has much to teach us 21st century American Christians. This story is shot through with images of bondage and freedom. There is a slave-girl, obviously not free because she is owned by another person. She is also in bondage to a “spirit of divination” – likely a mental illness- that her owners exploit for their own benefit.

This slave girl chooses – in what seems to be a surprising act of freedom- to follow Paul and Silas, two apostles who begin the story free but are quickly imprisoned because what they are teaching is threatening to the people in power. However, even behind bars they don’t exactly act like prisoners, as they pray and sing praise to God throughout the night. Set free by a powerful earthquake, they don’t run screaming for the hills like we might expect, they stick around, exercising their freedom in a surprising way, using it to minister to those around them.

The jailer seems at first to be free- he is, after all, on the liberated side of the bars. But how free is he really? As soon as he learns that the jail doors are open, he is prepared to take his own life because he knows he will be killed if the prisoners escape. He is in bondage to his superiors and to a system that sees him not as an individual, but as a means to an end.

¹ Soup Dragons, “I’m Free (to do what I want)”

² Lynyrd Skynyrd, “Free Bird”

³ Joan Armatrading, “Free”

The lines between freedom and bondage in this story are awfully blurry. In these few verses, there are people in bondage to other people, to culture, to mental illness, and to legal systems. And we see people in prison singing praise to God in what looks and seems to be absolute freedom. Those who seem to be free are not, and those who appear to be in bondage are, in fact, free.

Could it be that some of the things that pass for freedom – lack of responsibility, utter self-dependence, a lack of attachments – are really just a different kind of bondage? And what if some of the things that look like bondage – discipline, commitment, devotion to something beyond self – are actually freedom?

True freedom, as Paul and Silas knew, and the jailer soon learned, isn't about just doing whatever you want to do, when you want to do it. True freedom is a gift of grace, a gift for which Jesus Christ laid down his life. True freedom is not about the absence of bars or doors or rules or expectations, it is about the presence of God in our lives.

That presence demands something of us- it asks us to turn from our selfish pursuits and willingly give our lives over to God. It asks us to live not for ourselves but for others. It calls us to transcend our basic wants in order to help others have what they need. In demanding of us, God's presence in our lives frees us to be the people and live the lives God intends for us.

In E.B. White's classic children's novel *Charlotte's Web*, there is a beautiful scene that offers another glimpse into what freedom might really look like, with a farm as the setting and a group of animals as the primary actors. Here Wilbur, the plucky little runt pig, escapes his pen and finds himself free... in a sense. Listen to what ensues...

The news of Wilbur's escape spread rapidly among the animals on the place. Whenever any creature broke loose on Zuckerman's farm, the event was of great interest to the others. The goose shouted to the nearest cow that Wilbur was free, and soon all the cows knew. Then one of the cows told one of the sheep, and soon all of the sheep knew. The lambs learned about it from their mothers. The horses, in their stalls in the barn, pricked up their ears when they heard the goose hollering, and soon the horses had caught on to what was happening. "Wilbur's out," they said. Every animal stirred its head and became excited to know that one of its friends had got free and was no longer penned up or tied fast.

Wilbur didn't know what to do or which way to run. It seemed as though everybody was after him. "If this is what it's like to be free," he thought, "I believe I'd rather be penned up in my own yard."

The cocker spaniel was sneaking up on him from one side, Lurvy the hired man was sneaking up from him on the other side. Mrs. Zuckerman stood ready to head him off if he started for the garden, and now Mr. Zuckerman was coming down toward him carrying a pail. "This is really awful," thought Wilbur. . .He began to cry.

The goose took command and began to give orders.

“Don’t just stand there, Wilbur! Dodge about! Dodge about!” cried the goose. “Skip around, run toward me, slip in and out, in and out, in and out! Make for the woods! Twist and turn!”

The cocker spaniel sprang for Wilbur’s hind leg. Wilbur jumped and ran. Lurvy reached out and grabbed. Mrs. Zuckerman screamed at Lurvy. The goose cheered for Wilbur. Wilbur dodged between Lurvy’s legs. Lurvy missed Wilbur and grabbed the spaniel instead. “Nicely done, nicely done!” cried the goose. “Try it again! Try it again.”

“Run downhill!” suggested the cows. “Run toward me!” yelled the gander. “Run uphill!” cried the sheep. “Turn and twist!” honked the goose. “Jump and dance!” said the rooster. “Look out for Lurvy!” called the cows. “Look out for Zuckerman!” yelled the gander. “Watch out for the dog!” cried the sheep. “Listen to me, listen to me!” screamed the goose.

Poor Wilbur was dazed and frightened by this hullabaloo. He didn’t like being the center of all this fuss. He tried to follow the instructions his friends were giving him, but he couldn’t run downhill and uphill at the same time, and he couldn’t turn and twist when he was jumping and dancing, and he was crying so hard he could barely see anything that was happening.

After all, Wilbur was a very young pig - not much more than a baby, really. . . When he looked up and saw Mr. Zuckerman standing quite close to him, holding a pail of warm slops, he felt relieved. He lifted his nose and sniffed. The smell was delicious. . .

“Come, pig!” said Mr. Zuckerman, tapping the pail. “Come, pig!” Wilbur took a step toward the pail. “No-no-no!” said the goose. “It’s the old pail trick, Wilbur. Don’t fall for it, don’t fall for it! He’s trying to lure you back into captivity-ivity. He’s appealing to your stomach.”

Wilbur didn’t care. The food smelled appetizing. He took another step toward the pail. “Pig, pig!” said Mr. Zuckerman in a kind voice and began walking slowly toward the barnyard, looking all about him innocently, as if he didn’t know that a little white pig was following along behind him.

“You’ll be sorry,” called the goose. Wilbur didn’t care. He kept walking toward the pail of slops. “You’ll miss your freedom,” honked the goose. “An hour of freedom is worth a barrel of slops.” Wilbur didn’t care.

When Mr. Zuckerman reached the pigpen, he climbed over the fence and poured the slops in the trough. Then he pulled the loose board away from the fence, so that there was a wide hole for Wilbur to walk through.

Wilbur. . . stepped through the fence into his yard. He walked to the trough and took a long drink of slops. . . It was good to be home again.

While Wilbur ate, Lurvy fetched a hammer and some eight-penny nails and nailed the board in place. Then he and Mr. Zuckerman leaned lazily on the fence, and Mr. Zuckerman scratched Wilbur’s back with a stick. “He’s quite a pig,” said Lurvy. “Yes, he’ll make a good pig,” said Mr. Zuckerman.

Wilbur heard the words of praise. He felt the warm milk inside his stomach. He felt the pleasant rubbing of the stick along his itchy back. He felt peaceful and happy and sleepy. This had been a tiring afternoon. It was still only about four o'clock, but Wilbur was ready for bed.

What is freedom? I think it means different things to different people. And I don't think it always means what we think it means.

Freedom isn't always about getting out of the pen, out of the house, out of the difficulty. It isn't always about doing just what we want, when we want and where. That kind of freedom looks nice, but more times than not, it ends up feeling kind of hollow.

Separate from God, and God's will for our lives, freedom means very little. Only in God, through Jesus Christ, can any of us know the true meaning of freedom. Freedom not to do whatever we want, but rather to be better than we thought by submitting willingly to something greater than ourselves.

Thanks be to God. Amen.