

“What is Freedom For?”
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Turning Points: Moments When the Concept of Justice Changed
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In early August, a few weeks before my nephew Otto was born, I received a voicemail from my sister Kate saying, “Vince, call me back; Laura and I have some questions about circumcision.” Immediately I thought of the letter to the Galatians from which we just read, since for the first century church in Galatia, circumcision was the hot-button issue: to be or not to be circumcised. This is the question to which Paul addresses himself. And it’s not just Galatia; Paul writes about circumcision to the churches in Rome, in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Philippi, and in Colossus. That’s because there was a difference of opinion in the early church. Circumcision, along with eating rituals, and certain holidays, was part of Jewish law, and in the first and second generations of the Church it wasn’t clear whether the followers of Jesus were supposed to follow that law or not. Some leaders said yes, but Paul and others said no. Everyone in first century Christianity wanted to know what to do, and for some reason I assumed that was why my sister was calling me to ask about circumcision. In her mixed marriage of Christian and agnostic, she wanted an opinion on the spiritual significance of having her son circumcised. So I gathered my arguments and prepared a balanced report and called Kate back. I began, “So you want the expert opinion on the biblical understanding of circumcision...”

“No,” she said, “I just want to know if it will look funny. We don’t want him to get made fun of.”

It may be hard for us to imagine the power of this debate in Paul’s time. What would it be like for the Jews who followed Jesus to accept Paul’s invitation to step out from under the law or for the gentiles in Galatia and elsewhere, who had been convinced by others that they must follow the law? Perhaps something like if one day all traffic laws were suddenly repealed, and you were free to drive in whatever way you wanted without fear of consequence, at least from the law. It would raise a lot of questions for us, who are habituated to certain rules of the road. Would you wear a seatbelt? Stop at stop signs or crosswalks? Observe speed limits or no parking signs? Many people would probably keep some of these rules and do away with others. Others might continue to drive as if the laws had never been repealed, and still others would drive without concern for any rule. But what everyone would have in common in that new world, what the people of Galatia had in common, is that they would all suddenly have to make a choice: how will I live now that no one is telling me how? In this new world, the choices would be limitless.

That radical sense of freedom must be something like what Paul’s audiences experienced. Such freedom must have been both intoxicating and terrifying, to realize for the first time that you are free to do as you will. Elsewhere in Galatians Paul likens it to the experience of a minor coming of age—that sense that one is now responsible for one’s decisions, one can no longer rely on the boundaries of one’s parents. And like minors coming to the age of majority, it seems that some of those in Galatia had decided to take Paul at his word. And since they were no longer required to follow any

rules, they decided, they wouldn't follow any rules, except for the rule of their own desire.

These are the circumstances which I imagine led to Paul writing our passage for today. "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!" Taking Paul's message of spiritual freedom to heart, certain of his followers have bellied up to the all-you-can-eat freedom bar, and are gorging themselves, so much so that, as Paul sees it, in their devouring, they have begun to consume one another.

So Paul moves in to stop it. We can imagine that the people to whom Paul writes this might be a little miffed with him. Through the rest of the letter he has been berating those who refused to take advantage of their freedom, who continue to consign themselves to the law, as if following it would save them. The law breakers in the group have no doubt been nodding along through the first half of the letter, until Paul calls them out for exploiting their newfound freedom. Paul urges them to understand their freedom, not as license, but as an opportunity. In their freedom they have the opportunity to serve each other through love. Freedom for Paul is not so much about being rule-less as having that opportunity, having a choice. Freedom is not an end in itself, but merely the means to any number of ends. It begs the question, "What is freedom for?"

At first glance, Martin Luther King's conception of freedom seems quite different from Paul's. As a leader of the civil rights struggle, freedom was King's goal, the freedom of African Americans a noble end in itself. In our passage this morning, which comes from a speech near the beginning of his career, King says, "There is nothing in all the world greater than freedom." He says it is worth paying for, worth losing a job for, and ironically, worth going to jail for. Yet, even by the end of this speech it is clear that King does not simply value freedom for itself, but, like Paul, for that opportunity which freedom provides- that opportunity, says King, "to speed up the coming of the new world," a world of peace, a world of dignity, a world of equity.

Despite its greatness, King understands that freedom is not complete, that it is not the whole story. Freedom is a possibility, a promise which must be paid off. In speech after speech, the goal of freedom gives way to King's striking dreams and visions of a world made new. Freedom is not the end. He must have learned this lesson in some part by seeing the way in which those who were free used or abused their freedom. The freedom enjoyed by white America could be expended in the Freedom Rides, or in KKK rallies, or simply hoarded in contentment. Freedom for African Americans could not guarantee the inauguration of his dreams and visions. With freedom won, the question would need to be asked, "What is freedom for?" Or as King put it in the title of his final book, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* King, like Paul, understood the dual nature of freedom- the contrast between the sense of rule-less self-indulgence and the possibility and opportunity to build a new world in love, the difference between chaos and community, and he sought to put this question to the nation.

Historically, this turning point came close to the end of King's life. With the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the freedom of African Americans

began to increase and King increasingly turned his attention to the realization of that imagined new world. He spoke out against the Vietnam War, and in 1967 he and other leaders began the Poor People's Campaign, with the goal of moving congress to pass an Economic Bill of Rights. Yet these efforts were not met with the same success as the Civil Rights movement. Even before King's assassination, the Poor People's Campaign had a difficult time building a following. After his death, the Campaign went forward with its march on Washington but ultimately failed to achieve its objectives. America had granted a measure of freedom to African Americans but failed to follow through on what that freedom might be used to build, failed to ask what that freedom was for. It is telling that the Sunday following his death, Rev. King was scheduled to preach a sermon which he had titled, "Why America May Go to Hell," in which he planned again to urge his hearers to consider the world made possible by liberty, and the dire consequences of selfish inaction. In part of that unfinished sermon King wrote, "If America does not use her vast resources of wealth to end poverty, to make it possible for all of God's children to have the basic necessities of life, she too will go to Hell." King did not count freedom as something to be taken lightly or stored up for a rainy day but he spent every ounce of the freedom he had in struggle, and he expected the same of his country.

In Divinity School a professor in the history of religion came to speak to my class full of ministry students and delivered an inspiring lecture on the importance of pastors diagnosing the unique problems of their time. It was her contention as a historian that one could tell where the challenges or problems lay in a society by noticing the things which everyone seemed to be talking about. The more everyone in that time period spoke on the subject, the more words they committed to defending it, the more prominence it seemed to hold, the worse trouble it was in. In our day, she said, everyone is talking about freedom.

Freedom is perhaps *the* American virtue. It is our foundation, and I believe it has grown into our obsession. Freedom is a virtue; it is good and right that people should be free, and there is still work to be done in achieving that goal. Yet, as the examples of King and Paul demonstrate, freedom itself is not an end; it is only a beginning. Freedom is potential; freedom is opportunity, but what we do with freedom is what makes our lives. Will we choose chaos or community? Love or consumption of our neighbors? What is freedom for?

Despite our obsession, or perhaps because of it, I believe that it is precisely that question that we have failed to ask. We have focused instead on that which we would be free *from*. And we have been wildly successful. For most of us, this is a moment of radical freedom, a moment which the people of Galatia in 70CE and the people of Birmingham in 1963 could not imagine. We have spent a good deal of energy getting free, disentangling ourselves as well as we can. And I believe we stand today as free as any people have been on this earth. We have stored up freedom to spare, yet we still seem reluctant to ask "What is all this freedom for?" Now that no one can tell us what to do, what do *we* intend to do? Having torn down, what will we now build? Having disentangled, what will we now weave? Having freed ourselves from others' visions, to what dream will we now bind ourselves? Having become masters of our own destinies, will we, as Paul and King both suggest, use our freedom to serve each other in love, or will we devour one another in self-indulgence?

Nowhere is this more evident to me than in our present political climate, in which it seems each half of this country wishes to be free of the other, so much so that last week it once again broke out in violence. In this moment of radical freedom King's choice resounds in my ears: chaos or community? Will we pull further apart, bent on our own wills until all is destroyed? Or will we join in humility to ask how we might serve our sisters and brothers? If we are to continue, if we can hope for another turning point in justice, I believe we must change the conversation from how we can get free from one another, from how we can get rid of each other, to what we want to do together.

That is hard work. To tear down is easy; to build up is hard; consuming is easy; serving is hard; debate is easy; conversation is hard. Yet, the good news is that, as people of faith, commanded to love one another, we are uniquely positioned to begin that conversation. The good news is that, as in Galatia, freedom is the beginning of true service. For, to serve in unfreedom is slavery, but to serve in freedom is love. The events of the past weeks and of the past years invite us to pause and take stock, and to ask with Dr. King, "Where do we go from here?" And I close this morning with his conclusion from that book.

"We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity...Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words: 'Too late'...We still have a choice today: nonviolent coexistence or violent co-annihilation. This may well be [our] last chance to choose between chaos and community."