

June 29, 2025

Third Sunday After Pentecost

“Free to Love Again”

Luke 9:51-62

Understandably, most of us who will celebrate the free country of the United States of America don't have a particularly good idea of what it is to not be free. We may mark Independence Day next Friday with a lot of pride and gusto (and maybe small explosive devices), but we take the freedom we celebrate for granted. And the truth is, if you've grown up in the Lutheran Church, you may do the same thing with the freedom we have in Christ.

To not be free is to be owned, to be under threat of punishment for stepping out of line, being unable to act on one's own initiative but instead forced to the will of another. Freedom really has never been what we tend to think it is—doing whatever we want. Freedom is more the absence of a tyrant and taskmaster continually over you with the threat of the whip. In the U.S.A. since the abolition of slavery we've never had that. Sure, we have a government with laws we must obey, sometimes silly and annoying regulations that make life difficult, that taxes us too much and wastes a lot of that money while spiraling into debt. But we generally follow our own path in life and most of the bad consequences are a result of our own decisions. This is freedom, and it's all we've known.

Likewise, having grown up with the truth of the free Gospel of Jesus Christ, we don't know what it's like to be a slave under the Law. Just think about what that's like, theologically speaking. Every day you wake up knowing that God is watching and He sees each and every single sin, and there is a penalty for it. You can try to do better. You can try to make up for those sins by doing good works. You can sacrifice, fast, give away all you own and jump through every righteous hoop you can find, but one day the bill is going to come due. If you haven't obeyed, it's not going to be pretty. We have no idea what that's like. We have the Gospel. We know by faith in Christ that the penalty for those sins stands removed.

But that's kind of where the similarity between our American freedom and our Christian freedom breaks down. Freedom in the USA means we get to generally, within limits, do whatever we want and, according to the fallen flesh, that usually means serving our own interests and desires. Christian freedom means we have been freed from the tyranny of the law to walk with God; specifically, to follow Christ our Savior.

St. Paul writes, *“For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”* It is really important to understand your Christian freedom in the context of love, because if you don't you'll go on and read St. Paul's listing of the nasty works of the flesh and think he laying out rules of the law again for you.

Being set free in Christ is being set free to properly love again. Think back to the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Adam and Eve in the image of God simply loved God and loved one another; that was the perfect design. Sin ruined that. Sin made us objects of God's wrath, enemies of God imprisoned under His good and holy law which we could never properly keep. Love was replaced by loathing of God and self-centeredness in relation to others. We stood enslaved to sin, to its prince and to its curse of death.

Jesus has changed all that. By faith we have received forgiveness and adoption as sons and daughters of God, wearing the perfect righteousness of Christ. Our relationship with God and with others has been restored. No longer under wrath and condemnation, we are now free to love God and love one another as designed. Adam and Eve once lived lives of love, joyfully doing absolutely

everything to the glory of God in loving service to both God and to one another. We are now free in Christ to do the same.

But we don't want to! Well, at least part of us doesn't want to. Paul writes, *"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do."*

"To keep you from doing the things you want to do!"

This is true because what our sinful nature wants to do is selfishly serve the flesh, love the self, and do all things to our own glory. But the spirit of freedom in Christ wants to live to God's glory, abiding in His love as we were always designed to do. So every day we face a choice and live in a struggle between living to our own glory or following Christ in His.

Today's Gospel lesson is a snapshot of that: *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."* Following Christ has no guarantees of worldly prosperity or peace. Loving as Christ loves often means sacrificing the comforts of the world. *To another he said, "Follow me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." And Jesus said to him, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."* Loving God and His Word above all things may mean giving up that which you dearly love in the world, even family. *Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home." Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."* Following in the love of Christ isn't a part-time thing; it's a struggle you take up each and every day.

That Gospel reading seems harsh in a lot of ways. But Jesus is making clear that this freedom we have in the spirit simply isn't compatible with the idea of being free to do what we want in the flesh. It's not a both/and; it's an either/or. We are free to follow Christ in love of God and neighbor, or we're turning back on that to serve ourselves and return to the bonds of the fallen world.

Now our sinful flesh, and the world, and especially Satan, want to convince us that living and following Christ is still all about the law, about obeying lest the whip of God's condemnation fall upon us. But that is a lie! *"For freedom Christ has set us free..."*

The Gospel, abiding in the love of Christ, is not a burden under a threat. It is blessing to be celebrated! And the long and short of this sermon is that we need to realize this and live it, each and every day.

Think of the joy and appreciation you feel when you ponder how blessed you are to have been born into or emigrated to such a free and prosperous country, especially when so much of the rest of the world suffers tyranny and want. It makes our governmental inconveniences seem paltry and our desire is to make our home no place else.

How much more so is our joy at being reconciled with God, free to love and abide in His grace forevermore, especially not only because so many others reject the Spirit and fall into condemnation, but because condemnation is what we truly deserve! How can we take such freedom for granted????!!

We can't. So don't. Get your attitude right each and every morning and carry it through the day. You are forgiven and free in the Gospel. You do not have a taskmaster God standing over you with a whip. You have an adoring Father looking down on you in love because you stand baptized and wrapped up in the righteousness of the Son, Jesus Christ.

Be joyful, celebratory even, knowing that you are free and enabled by Jesus, to truly step out and be the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control of Christ to the glory of the Father, and abiding in the love of Christ to everyone in the world around you.

Amen.