

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT | MARCH 27, 2022

JOSHUA 5:9-12 | PSALM 32 | 2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21 | LUKE
15:1-3, 11B-32

For Lent this year, we're building a theological toolbox. Every week, you get a new tool to use on your theological problems, and at the end of Lent you have a nice little set. We've done justification, law and gospel, and vocation so far. And you're going to notice that these themes are going to start connecting this week in new ways. And this week, we're going to talk about freedom.

Freedom is one of those words that's a little hard to pin down. In one of his books, the historian Eric Foner writes that "freedom has always been a terrain of conflict, subject to multiple and competing interpretations."¹ Thomas Jefferson had a different definition than Frederick Douglas, William Jennings Bryan than Fannie Lou Hamer. So whenever we talk about freedom, we always have to start by getting our terms set out right.

The conception of freedom most important in our expression comes from a Luther essay from 1520 called "The Freedom of a Christian." If you only have time to read one Luther essay, this is a pretty good one.² And in that essay, he talks about how we have freedom *from* and freedom *for*. And those two ways always go together.

To start with, we are freed *from*. We probably have some conception of that to begin with. When people talk about freedom in our American context, freedom *from* is usually what they're getting at. Freedom of religion, freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc. This kind of freedom is about not having some external influence or constraint on your behavior or choices or speech. You can think of it as a kind of negative freedom. Freedom as absence.

Luther uses some of that imagery. In Jesus, Luther says, we are freed *from* sin and death. They don't have control over us the way that they used to. We are freed *from* self-absorption. Christ draws us out from our habit of turning in on our own interests. And we are freed *from* the demands of the law. We're offered forgiveness. We're freed *from* trying to justify ourselves.

And we are freed *for*. This one is a little harder to grasp at first. But the idea is that when we're freed *from* sin and death and self-absorption and all the rest, we're not just left to our own devices. We're freed *for* something. In Luther's conception, we're freed for the sake of our neighbor. God acts for us so that we can act for others.

This is a kind of positive freedom. We find freedom in the commitments that we make to our family, friends, and community. So the forces of sin and death no longer have a claim on us, but as soon as we're liberated from their grasp, now our

¹ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1999).

² It's surprisingly difficult to track down a copy online. The introduction to Romans is also good.

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neighbor makes a claim on us.³ We have been freed *for* their sake. And we find freedom in that commitment.

You actually heard a nice example of both of these types of freedom in today's gospel reading, which stars three great characters. To start with, we have the resentful son. This man has done everything right and by the book. But he sees other people flourishing or being treated generously, what's his response? He hates it. He's offended by it. He's so mad. This is what life looks like when we're turned in on ourselves. What life looks like when we don't have freedom of any kind. We see goodness in the world, and we can't appreciate it because we are so concerned with getting what we feel we deserve.

Next, let's go to the son who wants to leave his father. Why does he want to leave? He wants freedom. In particular, he wants freedom *from*. He wants to be out of any economic relationship that would place any responsibility or claim on him. Freedom from his father's household lets him do what he wants, but it doesn't get him very far in the long run. Freedom *from* might be good, but it isn't always redemptive on its own terms.

And you have the character of the father, a character who is freed both *from* and *for*. At first glance, it's not clear what he's freed from exactly. But it becomes clear when the other brother starts throwing a tantrum. This other brother gets upset because the father isn't being fair. He isn't treating the brothers according to their actions. "I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends." The father has been freed from simply reacting to others based on their actions. He's been freed from the logic of exchange.

And he has been freed for something, too. What exactly? To be gracious to his son. When the father breaks from the cycle of "treat others the way they treat you," he doesn't just do it to save some money on fatted calves. The other son gets no less than his share. He's no worse off. The father does it in the interests of being generous. What makes the father such a memorable character is that he's able to act outside the bounds of expectations. He's actually able to create something new. You can understand why this character is such a rich image of God's compassion.

So how can we use freedom *from* and freedom *for* as tools in our lives? Well, freedom *from* means that we should always be interrogating the things that exercise control on our sense of self. There are lots of messages that we get about where our value lies. Our value is in social status, economic productivity, physical desirability, etc. Because Jesus frees us *from*, we can interrogate the messages we get from the world and ask whether they're actually helping us love God and our neighbors. And if

³ Someone smarter than me could probably write a good dissertation on reading Luther in light of Levinas on the face-to-face encounter with the neighbor.

they're not, we can set them aside. Being freed from means being able to tell the difference between pursuing what's actually life-giving for us.

And freedom *for* has to do with purpose. This is related to what we did with vocation last week. Because God frees us for others, everyone has a purpose, a mission in life. You don't need to worry about whether your life has purpose and meaning, and you don't have to concoct some grand plan to invent one. Because God frees us for others, we always go into the world with a purpose.

Most of you probably know that our Lutheran liturgy has four basic parts. And the fourth part is called "Sending." We call it "Sending" because we're going with a purpose. Not just a dismal or a time's up or a let's go home. You don't just go into the world to kill time until next Sunday. You are sent into the world to continue God's mission until the next Sunday when we gather at the font once again.

So you get why we need both. We need to be freed from sin and death and all the rest. But we also need to be freed for the sake of our communities. In Jesus, God freely acts for us so that we can freely act for others.

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