

Welcome

I'm not sure there's a higher American value than personal freedom. Nearly any conversation in civil discourse, from gun control to economic policies to public speech and religion often end up coming back to this "Don't Tread on Me" mentality that fed the American Revolution.

"Don't Tread On Me"... We want to be selves without limits. We want no boundaries, no borders, no limitations. We want to be free, unboxed, uncaged, unrestrained.

But we recognize that purely unrestrained freedom isn't realistic - I remember learning in elementary school that 'freedom of speech' doesn't mean we can, for instance, shout 'Fire' in a crowded movie theater. When our freedom of expression puts others in harm's way, it becomes toxic to a society.

Similarly, in our relationships we recognize constraints. Our marriage vows bind us, reduce our freedoms (which is why the more cynical among us call marriage a 'ball and chain' - an image from prison). We identify friends who take and take and take and never contribute to the other person's good a toxic friend. Having children involves a complete overhaul of priorities and involves the loss of many freedoms - including the freedom to sleep whenever you want.

And yet we recognize these relationships as good - good for us and good for the world.

So maybe freedom isn't all it's cracked up to be. Maybe it's a good, but not the highest good. If that's true, it could change how we engage in conversations over personal freedoms.

Today, we're going to explore in a bit more depth our desire for freedom and what's behind it. We'll see that a quest for freedom can become a kind of idolatry (and we're not the first people to fall for it).

We'll see how self-giving love, the love that draws us into relationship with God and each other, is a greater good than personal freedom. And we'll see how pursuing this love above even freedom makes us freer than we ever thought possible.

Message

In the Church calendar, this is the season of Epiphany. As the season following Christmas, Epiphany celebrates God being revealed not just to a select chosen few, but to the whole world. This year, our Epiphany series is called "Ask Better Questions" - which I know doesn't make obvious sense out of the theme of Epiphany.

During this series, we're going to be reading the letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church he planted in Corinth. This letter is responding to questions they raised. Their questions are going to be specifically about how to understand God working in their lives. In other words, what does it mean to say that God is FOR the WHOLE WORLD? And when they're asking those questions, they're really asking, What does it mean to say that God is for ME? What does God mean for MY WORLD?

Corinth was sort of like the Las Vegas of its day. It was a prominent Greek city, ancient and proud. The city was packed with temples to Greek and Roman gods, overflowing with the best philosophers and thinkers of the day. It was a place where anything you wanted could be yours.

And Paul came to that city to tell everyone the good news: that a god they'd never heard of, from a little country they'd *barely* ever heard of, had come to Earth, been crucified by the mighty Roman Empire, and then was raised from the dead.

Which meant they could all worship him now as the one true God of the universe. A God who made very strange claims on their lives, a God who insisted - quite unlike gods the Corinthians had all grown up worshipping. Zeus didn't care if you also worshipped Apollo or Ares or Athena as long as he got his sacrifices.

But Paul insisted not only that this Jesus of Israel was the God, but the one true God, who was the only one to be worshipped.

The new Corinthian Christians were on board, but they had a lot of questions, especially after Paul left. Figuring out the practical, day-to-day realities of living in the power of the Holy Spirit was hard. So they wrote Paul letters, asking him for help navigating the complicated reality of God With Us.

We have the same underlying struggle as the Corinthians. But *their* world and *our* world are very different. So the questions they ask won't always make a lot of sense on first reading. We'll be looking for the question *under* the question, asking what they're *really* asking to get at the questions that point to the core of what it means to be human, to be created to bear the image of God in the world.

[Scripture Slide 1] Which brings us to today's text. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 6. This is the end of the opening chunk of the letter. So far, Paul has been addressing concerns raised by the Corinthians. He's gotten some pretty disturbing news - the house churches are fighting with each other, suing each other. And there's some crazy sexual immorality going on - some of the Corinthians are visiting temple prostitutes (a common feature of Greek pagan religion) and one man in the church is apparently shacking up with his step-mom.

The Corinthians are justifying themselves with a saying they've adopted: "I'm allowed to do anything". You might recognize that as the mantra of personal freedom. "There are no laws that can constrain me." Everything is okay. Even worse, the Corinthians who say this are justifying themselves with Christianity - they're claiming that, because they're saved and forgiven, it doesn't matter what they do.

They've asked the question, "What am I allowed to do?" and answered it by saying, "Anything! I'm free!" Paul writes to them to correct this notion, and in the process, reframe what they understand freedom to be.

You say, “I am allowed to do anything”—but not everything is good for you. And even though “I am allowed to do anything,” I must not become a slave to anything. You say, “Food was made for the stomach, and the stomach for food.” (This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them.) But you can’t say that our bodies were made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies. And God will raise us from the dead by his power, just as he raised our Lord from the dead.

Don’t you realize that your bodies are actually parts of Christ? Should a man take his body, which is part of Christ, and join it to a prostitute? Never! And don’t you realize that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one body with her? For the Scriptures say, “The two are united into one.” But the person who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

Run from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body. Don’t you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. -- 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

When the Corinthians insist they are free to do anything, Paul doesn't disagree with them. He doesn't say, "Hey, no you're not free!" Instead he observes what should be obvious to the Corinthians, if they would only look honestly at themselves:

They *can* do everything. But that doesn't mean everything is *good*. Paul observes that the way they're indulging in their freedom isn't good for them, it's not good for the other members of their church, and it's not good for the world around them.

Paul reframes the question of personal freedom with the question of relationships. When our driving concern is personal freedom, we're caught up with questions of what's allowed.

How far is too far? How much can I get away with? What's the outer limit here?

In this view of religion, God becomes like a restrictive parent, always trying to get in the way of what we really want to do. And other people become means to our ends. What matters most is my pleasure, my fulfillment. Me, me, me. Questions of personal freedom end in selfishness.

Instead, Paul reminds the Corinthians that to be in Christ is to be in relationship, and relationship refocuses us away from ME toward God and others.

This is most explicit at the end of the passage - the culmination of Paul's argument - when he observes, "Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?"

We miss what Paul is really saying here because we don't have a good Texas translation of the Bible yet. Greek has a singular and a plural form of the second person pronoun - in other words, 'you' and 'y'all'.

What's fascinating about this verse is that when Paul says 'your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit', the word 'you' is plural, but the word 'body' is singular.

So he's not saying, 'Your body' OR 'y'all's bodies'. He's saying "y'all's body".

This verse gets used out of context all the time to talk about how we treat our individual bodies (like why not to get tattoos or something). But Paul isn't talking here only about our individual bodies.

He's saying that when we give our lives to follow Jesus, we belong to God *and to each other*. It means you and I belong to each other. That when we all come together as one body, one church, then we are the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Which means what I do with my body affects you. And what you do with your body affects me. Much in the same way spouses belong to each other, so too do members of the same church belong to each other.

All that matters because Paul is reframing this question of sexual morality and personal freedom. The Corinthians want to know, "How much am I allowed to do? Can I see that temple prostitute? Can I shack up with my stepmom?"

And Paul is saying, "Woah, you're asking the wrong question. The question shouldn't be, 'Is this allowable? Am I free to do this?'"

"You should be asking, 'Is this *good*? Is this good for the Church? Is this honoring the God who rescued me and gave me this body? Is this good for me?'"

Personal freedom is subject to the law of love. If something is loving toward God and others, then we don't do it, regardless of whether we're *free* to do it or not.

That's challenging. It rubs my American sensibilities the wrong way. I want to stand up and say, "Whoa, Paul! Don't tread on me!"

But Paul also points out the insidious trap of personal freedom. In verse 12 he warns, "**Even though I am allowed to do anything, I must not become a slave to anything.**"

A quest for personal freedom all too easily becomes a quest to satisfy our own selfish desires. We end up pursuing pleasure at any cost, or success or financial security. We reduce others from brothers and sisters created in the image of God to means to accomplish our own agendas. Unrestricted freedom makes slaves of us all.

Paul calls us to more than this. He calls us to remember we were created to be eternal. The highest calling of our lives is not pleasure or food or a nice paycheck.

I grew up in Church, and I can tell you the one question that me and all my friends wanted to know in youth group:

How far is too far? (We were teenagers and yes, this was specifically about sex.) We were captivated by this question: what, exactly, were the limits of what we were allowed to do?

No one pulled us aside to tell us we were asking the wrong question. No one suggested to us that maybe the people on the other end of that question existed for more than just to make us feel good.

Instead, the Church played the game. Youth leaders argued over exactly where the line was, with many going so far as to say that boys and girls can't even be friends because there's just too much sexual temptation and potential for sin!

No wonder, if that is the best the Church can do when it comes to talking about sexuality, the Church is no better than Hollywood or Washington, D. C. when it comes to sexual exploitation. Last year, when the #metoo movement swept across the nation, women all over the country shared stories of sexual harassment and assault they had experienced at work, on the streets, in public spaces like malls and movie theaters.

But then another hashtag started trending: #churchtoo. Women (and men!) began sharing experiences of how they had been victimized *in churches*. Often by pastors or other leaders.

How can it be that church leaders, people called by God to lead congregations in the way of Jesus' self-giving love, come to a place where they see those very congregants as persons to be used and exploited for their own pleasure?

There are *many* factors that play into this issue, and none of them excuses the pastors and leaders who abuse people in their care. But according to Paul, this kind of dysfunction stems from refusing to see each other as more important than myself. It grows from a desire for my own pleasure at the expense of others.

We belong to each other, so we have a responsibility to each other. Not to abuse or exploit but to love, to cherish and protect. This can only happen when we make others primary, when we put their good above our wants.

Friends, we are images of the eternal God, invited by this God into a loving stewardship of this beautiful creation. We are kings and queens, created to rule the world with God and with each other. God has entrusted *us* with making the world as it could be.

What an incredible privilege! What a high calling!

Yet we squander it by chasing after fleeting pleasures. We get caught up in insisting that we can do whatever we want and ensuring no one get in our way.

Instead of asking, "What is *good* here? How can I use my freedom to become a blessing to others?" we ask, "Where's the line? How far is too far? What's the most I can get away with here?"

We were created for more than this. We were created to be better than this. We belong to each other. We are obligated to each other and to God. And when we come together in love, we are the temple of God's Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead!

Communion + Examen

Jesus shows us the way of self-giving love, putting our needs above his desires.

1. When in the last week did I put another's needs ahead of my own desires?
2. When in the last week was I most concerned with my own desires?
3. When in the next week might I be tempted to focus mainly on my own desires?
4. How can I choose to work for the good of others around me this week?

Assignment/Blessing

Question: How am I using my freedom?