

I want to start with a question for you all:

What does the word freedom mean to you? What other words does it evoke? ...

It can be confidently said that to experience God, to be filled and moved by the power of God's Spirit, is to experience freedom. These two are in some way the same thing: God and freedom. Indeed, in his letters to the early church in Corinth, Paul writes that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."

So as we get started, I want to ask you to take a moment and close your eyes, and ask yourself:

- What is the freedom for which you long to be set free? What do you long to be set free from? What do you long to be set free for? — Big or small.

Pray.

So, you may have heard of the Golden Rule; has anyone here heard of the Golden Rule?

—Those who have the gold make the rules.

Is that not the Golden Rule you were thinking of?!

If we're completely honest, *this* is the Golden Rule that reigns in our world. Those who have power and wealth have the freedom to influence and shape rules that enable them—and those like them to live freely, while others are made subject to the just and unjust rules alike which they create.

It is into *this* concrete reality that Scripture proclaims God's radically alternative way breaks in, calling us from the world's Golden Rule to God's Golden Rule. When the ancient Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt, God heard their cry and set about delivering them from captivity. But God doesn't just deliver them *from* slavery. The key story of the Exodus leads to the next key story: the establishment of the covenant between God and the people at Mount Sinai, a covenant that binds them in just and merciful relationships. God liberates *from* slavery and death-dealing powers *for* life-giving and nurturing webs of relationships.

Similarly, it was into this concrete reality of the ancient Roman world that Paul's proclamation that "it is for freedom Christ has set us free" was heard. Paul continues, saying: "Therefore, do not submit yourselves again to a yoke of slavery."

Gospel proclamation and Christian community in the ancient world weren't about being nice. They weren't about teaching us how to be ladies and gentlemen who knew proper social etiquette and embraced the status quo rule of law in the land.

The gospel of a God who sets us free for fullness of life has proven in different ages and places to be nothing less than revolutionary, leading people to rise up, resist, and overturn the status quo wherever fear and oppression rule, life is diminished and humanity is denigrated.

As this gospel of radical freedom was proclaimed throughout the Roman Empire, a disconcerting number of people were drawn to the Jesus movement. The powers-that-be couldn't understand it. In a famous letter from the Roman governor Pliny to the Emperor Trajan around the year 111, we hear of women slaves who had joined this liberating movement and become deaconesses in the church of Bithynia. There were

more slaves who joined the Christian community expecting the church to buy their freedom. The Good News of Jesus, encountering the living God, and experiencing a life-altering freedom were—and are still—bound together.

In fact, the very point of telling these ancient scriptural stories is to find ourselves in them.

At every Passover feast, when successive generations of Jews tell the story of God liberating the People of Israel from slavery, they understand themselves as in some very real way being there. As they enter its storyline, they discover that *they themselves* are the ones who have been—who are being—liberated!

The same can be said of the resurrection stories and call to New Life in the Gospels. This testimony from the past becomes *our* present experience, *our* present reality and the future into which we are called evermore.

There is a deep dissonance between the freedom of God and the freedom that rules our world.

In the United States, we are very fond of the word “freedom;” it’s *the* fundamental value of our own national story. I am deeply grateful to be a citizen of this country. But, it is incredibly important not to conflate the calling of our faith with the practices of our nation.

Throughout history, “freedom” has been based on the Golden Rule—it has often meant the right of the few to rule or dominate, for it was only the victor, the strong one, who was free—a freedom that has always been maintained by the

subjugation of others, by keeping them, whoever they are, in their place.

If we're honest, this is still the truth in our world today.

- One person's supposed freedom to own an AR-15 means parents send their children to school fearing for their lives.
- The freedom to "safety" in one neighborhood is predicated on keeping certain "others" out—whether through legal segregation or housing, zoning, bank lending, and other policies that create the same realities.
- The freedom to security in one country is maintained through an ever-expanding military, militarized police force, border security, and threats of nuclear war.
- The freedom to buy cheap clothes or food is ensured by an economic system that forces others to work in incredibly unsafe conditions for minimal pay, like the majority of farm-laborers in this country, who are undocumented immigrants, whose labor we fundamentally rely on, who are severely underpaid, who work in extreme conditions, yet who are forced to endure the trauma of having their life change at any moment.

These disparities are not on accident. They are actually *ensured* by the very rules and systems governing our country and world. The "freedom" we enjoy is predicated on the unfreedom of others.

Our world's freedom is selfish and self-preserving rather than freeing us for the mutual flourishing of all, which *could* cost us our position, possessions, power or privilege.

But God frees us from these ways of being into ones that serve one another.

Just as God led the early church to buy slaves' freedom, and later to work for its abolition in this so-called "Christian nation," God also frees us for covenantal relations of justice and mercy—frees us to show up and be there for one another, to put life and well-being above any law that would denigrate it.

As Nelson Mandela proclaimed: "To be free is not merely to cast off one's own chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Human freedom is found in connection and solidarity with others. It is enhanced wherever others discover and experience a greater fullness of life and it is diminished whenever other's lives are diminished.

God frees us to see that our safety can never be wrought with guns or walls or zoning; that our humanity and well-being cannot be separated from those across the street or in the inner-city or the southern border or Palestine or Yemen or...

God frees us for real community where we can be our authentic and imperfect selves: free from harsh judgment and free to love extravagantly; freedom from anxiety and scarcity, which make us believe that we are not enough or don't have enough, and freedom to trust that we are enough, we are loved, and to live from a place of abundance—regardless of our monetary wealth.

God frees us to speak our own truth and still honor the other; frees us to forgive and reconcile; to care for creation and harvest its generous bounty rather than dominate, exploit and wound it for our gain.

God frees us to admit that we're all addicts—to our own ideas and ways of doing things; to our comfort, possessions and privilege; to anything that will numb our pain—God frees us to

admit that we're addicts and to surrender to God's liberating, life-giving power.

That is the difference between the freedom for which God has freed us, and the freedom that the United States—and everywhere else—is based on.

This freedom, *God's* freedom is our only hope, for only it is able to heal wounds—wounds that freedom predicated on domination, competition and exclusion continue to inflict.

Beloved, to believe in God is to lay hold of this freedom. Inasmuch as we gather together and remember these stories of faith, we do so to re-member them in the present, to put them back together in our own bodies and world and living, *for our healing and for the healing of the world.*

Indeed, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."

So I ask you again the question I am asking myself:
what is the freedom for which you long?
What do you long to be free from?
What—and whom—is God calling you to be free for?

May God free your heart and mind, hands and feet, mouth, eyes and ears to walk in this freedom.
Amen.