

Something that is coming up most strongly for me in our community lately is nurturing the wisdom of the collective. We, as a congregation, are in a time of transition and it is important that we acknowledge the amazing, wise and strong contingent of human wisdom that resides in this community. As I said to a group in our church this week- in times of stress people respond in two ways- we pull into our selves, or we reach out to the community. For the sermon today, I sent out a request to a number of people, at random, to seek their wisdom. The question was, "What does freedom have to do with love?" What you hear today is derived from the wisdom of those in the seats next to you, as well as community members who are away traveling, from as far away as Fort Saint John and Yugoslavia.

Our scripture today is a portion of a letter written to the Galatians by Paul. Paul is a guy who knows what it's like to lose physical freedom, therefore, he does not take his freedom for-granted and speaks very directly in this passage about the importance of love in connection to freedom. Paul, a man who in his early life was in direct opposition to the church, found that after his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, his life got significantly more difficult. Despite this difficulty, in Second Corinthians Paul boasts about his hardships, saying he is a better minister of Christ, "with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death." He goes on to say that five times he received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times he was beaten with rods and once he received a stoning." He continues... the passage is 2 Corinthians Chapter 11 versus 20-32 if anyone wants to check it out.

In an ideal situation, we would have Paul, or another person who knows what it is like to lose their physical freedom, Nelson Mandela, any of the 1,500 youth who are incarcerated at a given time across Canada or people in a country struggling under a dictator speak to us about freedom. Because something happens to a person when physical freedom is taken away. Something that I don't pretend to understand. Something inside a person changes.

A congregation member, who is traveling in Yugoslavia, speaks to this reality saying, "Yugoslavia was ruled by a dictator for 40 years... people have dealt with restrictions to their freedom (by) developing rich cultures with strong emphasis on the family and church. The lack of what we know as freedom has made people appreciate life...when people have their freedom threatened they start to understand how deeply they care for the people around them, the unique culture that makes up the fabric of their life and the land they inhabit. Those of us who have never had our freedom threatened cannot fathom what it would be like to lose everything we care about and everyone we love. Unappreciated freedom can lead to complacency".

Paul speaks to this idea in the first verse of our reading today, saying, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery".

Our congregation member is sharing a modern viewpoint on Paul's perspective regarding freedom. A paraphrase could be, "Appreciate your freedom. Do not allow yourself to become complacent".

Paul also writes, "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another". I wonder how we can understand these words about freedom and love, as a wealthy people living in a beautiful and democratic country?

Another member of our community helps us understand this idea. She begins by sharing a quote by Mother Theresa, "The paradox is that if you love until it hurts, there is no more hurt, only more love." She goes on to say, as a "sandwich generation" parent, one who cares for my children as well as an ailing parent...I am constantly pulled by the needs and wants of those whom I love with all my heart. There are so many times that love seems to come with a price tag...time being the biggest hurdle, there never seems enough of it to give. So the paradox is in giving so much of yourself that it is exhausting and painful and overwhelming- yet in the very next breath you can be filled with love once again as you experience a moment of grace or joy. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' A member of our community who is currently away from those she loves most, shares the importance of love in her own life and how the absence of love feels like a loss of freedom. "I would guess that love is the most important thing in most lives. For example, for me, having close friends and family is more important than other things I value. If you live in a beautiful city and work in a good job, but have no family, friends or caring community there, I think you might start to feel unhappy or trapped. The part of someone who needs these things is restricted. However, if you live in the same city, or even a poorer place but have friends, family or a caring community, you may be very happy and feel free.

Paul writes about the life-giving benefits that come through using freedom in service of loving the community, he shares that, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control". A member of our community explores this further telling us that, "Loving your fellow man and all creatures and trying to see the best in everyone frees you to think positively and feel healthier and happier. Usually, when you smile at someone, they will smile back. Behaving in a loving, positive and accepting way will, in the same way, usually elicit these same feelings from others. Positive, loving thoughts within yourself and coming from others will help free you from insecurities and negative thoughts.

"Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh". Here, Paul is not talking about the physical body when he says flesh. A modern way of understanding this concept could be to live by the Spirit and not by the Ego or false self. A congregation member explores this idea by looking at physical and mental freedom saying, "you can be physically enslaved but mentally free. Mental freedom is only achieved with faith and deep appreciation, understanding, beliefs and acceptance of love. With that you have no boundaries. You can be physically free but tying yourself down with no understanding of what full freedom means. You see people around and although they can do what they want, they aren't free mentally because they haven't gone within themselves and allowed themselves to be free. They have barriers formed." I can relate to the experience of building barriers. I grew up in a stressful and unpredictable home environment. This experience as a child created ways of being that often do not serve me. In stressful situations, what I learned as a child was to pull in, rather than reach out. Unfortunately, that way of being is unsustainable as we are designed, as humans, to be interconnected. Because of this emotional pattern of pulling in at 23 my body was so tight I could not reach past my knees when trying to touch my toes. I always tell my yoga and

meditation students that I practice yoga and meditation because I need yoga and meditation. This practice helps me to free myself from my barriers so I have a greater capacity to love.

I will conclude today with some wise words from the youngest contributor to this call out for sermon wisdom: She writes, "Mental freedom is like... well say you're in slavery or have few rights, you can still be free mentally if you allow yourself to think of love, hope, compassion, to understand yourself... The only thing that can stop you from taking that journey is yourself... Love is the foundation... No matter what difficulty is in front of you...you are beyond that and you can be at peace with yourself. Peace within yourself is a form of freedom. If you love the person in front of you no matter how disagreeable, then you have released the barrier that says, "my emotions, judgement, and misunderstanding is in charge! If you love that person then you are understanding them, going beyond yourself, forgiving, befriending and freeing yourself. Freedom is a different outlook on life in which you don't have to stop yourself. You don't have a barrier saying, "No, you can't love, you can't understand, you can't forgive or move on or depend or befriend or hope or have joy in the simple things. You can!"

For freedom Christ has set you free. Stand Firm.