

Part 6: We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ.

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Growing up in the Hispanic congregation, it is tradition to go to Covenant Harbor Bible Camp up in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin for our annual Baptismal Sunday. If I go through photo albums, I see many joyful expressions on people's faces. I can recall the exact songs of worship one would sing from the gazebo and on the pier. I imagine that this is how Israel left Egypt when God took them out of slavery. They had joyful expressions, they were clapping, and they were singing songs of praise and worship. However, as we continue to read in the book of Exodus, we soon find out that during hard times the people of Israel would cry out to God asking him to take them back into Egypt, even though their status would go back to being one of slavery.

When we read scripture, we see that Egypt is a place where the people of Israel are treated as second class citizens. Egypt represents a place of captivity. In this case, that captivity took over the lives of the Israelites and there was a clear distinction between social classes. I think many of us would agree that being captive is no way of living: someone telling you what to do, what to eat, causes emotional distress. When one comes to know Christ, that emotional distress and emptiness is broken. Why? Because there is power in the name of Jesus to break every chain in our lives that is keeping us captive.

The problem is that many times we are just like Israel we cry out to God and wish to go back to our old way of living. Why? A possible answer is that our old way of living is going back to our comfort zone. Of course humanity has the tendency to find great comfort in engaging in a pattern of what feels natural and familiar. Comfort zones exist in every area in our lives. The key is to be aware of them and examine which comfort zones may not be beneficial to the Kingdom of God. Which comfort zones are preventing you from change? Which comfort zone keeps you from experiencing freedom in Christ?

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.”(Galatians 5:13)

It is no secret that outside the walls of the church (and even inside the church) there is a clear distinction between socio economic levels, race, ethnicity, and appearance. This is of course uncomfortable to acknowledge, because we begin to talk about what breaks God's heart. God sent his one and beloved son to break all these chains among us, so that we can experience true love and freedom through him. We affirm the reality of freedom in Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1) This freedom is a gift of God in Christ, so that we can serve the community and the world. For Paul, this freedom means that we are set free from the power of those things that tend to divide. United in Christ we offer freedom to one another to differ on issues of belief or practice where the biblical and historical record

seems to allow for a variety of interpretations of the will and purposes of God. We in the Covenant Church seek to focus on what unites us as followers of Christ, rather than on what divides us.

Bible Study

Change of Status

For eleven years, a man named Merhan Karimi Nasserri was stateless. During that time, he lived in an airport in Paris. He had no passport, he did not have citizenship, and he had no documents that would allow him to exit the airport or fly to another nation. He had been expelled from Iran, his country of origin. Then, he was kicked out of Paris, France for lack of proper documentation. He had manifested that they had stolen his refugee documents issued by Belgium. He flew to England, but was refused entry and sent back to Paris. When he returned to Paris in 1988, the airport authorities allowed him to live in terminal 1. He remained there for eleven years, writing in a journal, living off the gifts that the employees of terminal 1 would give him, showering in the bathrooms in the airport.

In September of 1999, his situation changed. French authorities gave Nasserri an international travel card and a permit of French residency. All of a sudden, he was free to go wherever he'd like. When the airport authorities gave him permission to go, to everyone's shock he simply smiled and put the documents in his binder and continued to write in his journal. They discovered that he was afraid to leave the station that had become his home for eleven years. As days went by and Nasserri refused to leave, the authorities decided that they were not going to kick him out of the airport, but that they would patiently and kindly try to convince him to look for a new place.

Can you imagine a more unnatural home than an airport? There is so much movement, it may be interesting place, but it is not a place to call home. When we come to Christ, we need to take a step that may be terrifying, such as the moving out of the airport like Nasserri should have done. We have been invited to leave the unnatural home (the ways of this fallen world) into our new home: the freedom of the kingdom of God. Do not stop!

The Dominion of Sin and Death

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned. (Romans 5:12)

Pain and suffering are part of human experience as consequences of their bad decisions. But as humans, we want to conquer the perceived obstacles in front of us. A few examples:

- In the 16th Century, great European empires such as Spain, England, and Portugal went after the conquering and expansion of their empires. This conquest is what we now refer to the New World (the Americas).
- In the United States, we had the conquest of the West.
- In the decade of the 60's and 70's, space programs were implemented at great costs with the end of conquering outer space.

- Death has also formed part of the list of things that humanity has tried conquering. In many cultures, there are records of reincarnation, a prime example is this ritual in Egyptian culture. Pyramids were great tombs where they would deposit the body of Pharaoh all “dolled up” for the afterlife. Another civilization that did believe in the afterlife are the Aztecs, the Hindu culture, etc.

However successful we have been at our various conquests, the experience of sin and death has been a losing battle.

But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! (Romans 5:15)

Freedom from the dominion of sin and death is only possible by the grace of God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

Questions:

1. What have you conquered in your life?
2. Has there been a circumstance where someone has offered freedom through another means that is not by the grace of God?
3. How has freedom in Christ transformed your story?

Your Freedom, Christ's Mission

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoner and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” (Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus Christ has called us to a ministry of deliverance, healing, and salvation. The call of Jesus Christ to a ministry marked by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit anointed Jesus Christ and gave him power for His mission. The call of Jesus Christ to a ministry marked by the proclamation of the Good News:

- proclaim freedom from the dominion of sin and death
- proclaim freedom from the dominion of Satan
- proclaim freedom from the dominion of fear, guilt, and shame

We need to seek this physical, emotional, and spiritual freedom. Freedom. We live in a broken world and we are going to experience brokenness in one area or another at one point or another in our world, but Jesus Christ has overcome this world and called us to experience and proclaim his freedom.

Questions:

1. In what areas of your life do you need healing or freedom from?
2. What does it mean to you, to be anointed by the Holy Spirit?
3. Does the anointing of the Holy Spirit make a difference in the proclamation of deliverance, healing, and salvation?