**Freed to Love and Serve**

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**Texts: 1 John 4:7-12, Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

In June, I attended my first class for my Doctor of Ministry coursework and turned in my first big project. The professor had sent the syllabus at the beginning of April, and there were three pages of explanation about this project. But, despite the length, there were hardly any specifics. Essentially, we were tasked with taking any aspect of creation and creating any type of multimedia presentation that explored the topic of agape, of being seized by a love of another that awakened a relationship with creation, focusing on themes such as resilience, hope, or really any other theological concept we chose.

Did I mention that this was my first class in the D.Min. program? My classmates and I chatted about this assignment in bewilderment. We were hoping for a little more direction. The freedom of the assignment was a lot. Now, for those of you who are wondering, we all did fine. Each student had a completely different interpretation of the assignment, but all of them were exactly what Dr. Greenway wanted. He wanted that diversity, those viewpoints, the wide array of theological points, and the deep conversation that was born from them.

But y’all, it stressed me out. See, I’m a little bit of a perfectionist. I love to do things well. And I’m sure that there is a definite right way to do it. I find comfort in grades and lists that can be checked off, proof that I’m doing things right, that I’m on the right track. And if the task doesn’t already have a goal and a rubric, I’m happy to create one for myself, a trait my mother witnessed, in amusement and horror, as I would create, assign, complete, and grade a research project or presentation for myself each summer of my childhood.

It's easier to know what’s good and right when it’s all laid out for you, right? This is the problem that the churches in Galatia are having. See, Paul went to Galatia and planted a bunch of churches there. He taught them that they all belonged to Christ through grace and that it didn’t matter that they were Gentiles or that they didn’t follow all the Jewish laws. They were made right with God because of what Jesus did, dying and rising for us. They were made right because of faith, not

works. They could never earn enough points to get to heaven on their own merit; no one could, and that didn’t matter because their faith made them free. It wasn’t about living life to become right with God; they were already right with God because of grace. And now they were free to live as people loved by God.

And all was good. For a little while. But people were still trying to figure out this Jesus thing. There were these other groups of Jesus followers, who also thought that Jesus had opened the doors to the Gentiles, but only if they would adhere to all the lists of laws in the Torah, including the right foods to eat, the right clothes to wear, the right ways to pray, and the necessity to look the part by being circumcised. Without Paul around, the Galatians were getting confused. The lists are nice. They made sense. They gave the new believers a clear path to the kingdom — a right way to do it and an easy way to calculate their success.

When Paul heard this, he sent a deeply frustrated and passionate letter to the Galatians, imploring them to remember what he had taught them and not be deceived by anyone who claimed that they had to earn God’s love like this. Paul tells them, “the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (Galatians 5:6b). But you have to admit that this seems like a rather nebulous assignment. What does it look like to express faith through love? What is love anyway? I mean, I love peaches and cats. I love to read and play games. These are things I love, but the love that Paul’s talking about isn’t a love of things or activities. It’s love born in relationship where we recognize our connectedness and are moved to react in ways that honor and uplift each other.

I sometimes wonder if Paul had any idea that churches would still be reading his newsletters to his first churches? And I wonder what he would write to the church today? I wonder who he would warn us to be wary of…who he would accuse of throwing us into confusion and keeping us from obeying the truth (Galatians 5:7, 10)? I wonder if Paul would be quick to implore us to use our freedom in Christ to love one another and model that in the world, instead of biting and devouring each other in a race for power and control (Galatians 5:15).

Or perhaps Paul wouldn’t be writing to us but instead warning others about us. Are we the ones who create rules and build hurdles others must jump over to join us? Do we insist, as those other Jesus followers did, that to be a part of the church you must change yourself to be just like us? Do we cling too much to the rules, traditions, and understandings of the past that we can’t see a world in which Jesus loves those who are not like us?

Paul says we are freed by Christ for freedom (Galatians 5:1). Yet, we often

allow ourselves to be enslaved by our own desires. Human desires for food, relationships, security, and success are not inherently bad. Without an impulse

to satisfy personal needs and achieve one’s desires, we would not have an

impulse to eat, to build shelter, to seek relationships, or to engage in commerce. In the Jewish tradition, these human desires are called *yetzer hara*, literally the inclination toward evil. But rabbinical wisdom reminds us that they are not inherently evil. It is only when they are left unchecked that evil takes hold. Unrestrained ambition leads to greed, envy, selfish ambitions, exploitation of others, immoral behaviors that infringe on others, fits of rage, drunkenness, dissentions, and faction building. *Yetzer hatov* is the opposite, the inclination toward very good, that channels these human desires in ways that are constructive and give life in community.

I think this is what Paul is getting at when he says that what the flesh desires is contrary to the spirit. They are in conflict with each other. Led by worldly desires, we can get ourselves in trouble. Torah law sought to constrain those desires, creating a framework for people to live in right relationship with one another. But, Paul says, if you are led by the Spirit, you do not need to be constrained by these law, for you will already seek to do the good and right things that keep our desires decent and in order. You are freed to view each and every circumstance through the lens of love instead of law.

The hardest thing about teaching is that each child is different and the things

 that one child needs to thrive may be completely different than another. When a system is too rigid, it can be more hurtful than helpful. Systems give us structure and are a good place to start, but they can leave people out when they lack the ability to respond to the unique nature of each human. More than once, I found myself up against an administration following the rule but failing to see the very heart of the child I knew from living classroom life together.

Paul says we are freed to love and serve one another (Galatians 5:13).

He urges us to use our freedom to enslave ourselves to one another in love or, as the NIV translates it, to serve one another humbly in love.

Freedom doesn’t mean you aren’t connected, but that you are connected in

right and loving ways. This is koinonia – the commitment to shared lives, lives intertwined with each other that seek mutual goodness and strength, lives lived hand in hand with the Spirit of God.

These loving, interconnected ways of living together are the nature of agape love. It’s “I love” with no qualifiers…not a thing or an action, but a connection. And it’s not sweet, not pretty, not capture-it-in-a-picture-and-hang-on-your-mantle love. It’s messy, sweaty, sticky, sitting-down-in- the-mud-with-you kind of love. It’s put-on-your-gloves-and-brave-the-ick-and-prickles love. It’s a courageous love that sits down with someone that is as likely to hit as they are to hug. It’s a brave love that searches past the messiness on the surface to seek the humanity that isn’t so much different than our own. It’s risky love because it means taking a chance that it might not work out or might earn us the hostile glare of others.

I had a child in my class who was as prickly as they come. Another child, believing me when I told the class that Thomas was having a hard time and we needed to wish him well…a lot, made it his mission to love that kid. Austin partnered with Thomas every time we played a game. And, believe me, it didn’t always work out. But every time, Austin was there for him. And eventually, Thomas learned to trust his friend and, slowly, he began to take off his armor. I could have made a kid partner with Thomas, but the thing that made this work is that Austin did it with pure love. To give of yourself to another, not out of obligation, but out of love, is Spirit-filled.

While no one has even seen God, we have seen God at work in our lives. It’s most often through small acts of daily grace. When we see the good things God is doing, we are shaped by this love. We learn to love others, which trains our eyes to see the grace more clearly. Again, I tell you, if you can’t find God, start by loving others and you will see God’s love spilling out everywhere.

The only thing that counts, Paul says, is faith expressing itself through love. There are no checklists. No going through the motions. Only love rippling out into the world. We do the little everyday things that honor the humanity of another. We make spaces where diversity is celebrated and where ways are found for everyone to have a place and part in our life together. We build relationships with those who are different than us and seek our common humanity. We believe that we all carry the image of God and love each other, so that the divine image of loving-kindness, for God is love, can be made visible in every person and with it, the kindom of God. Amen.