

June 25, 2017
1 Corinthians 8 (Lord of All/Servant of All)
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Today we continue our summer exploration of Reformation themes and insights.

Our theme for this week is another one of those paradoxes Pastor Fred mentioned last Sunday, things that seem to contradict each other, yet are both true at the same time.

In his work, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther wrote:

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”

“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

At the same time, a Christian is lord of all, subject to none, *and* a servant of all, subject to all.

Just let that sink in for a moment...

Because Jesus has given us new life through his death and resurrection, Christians are completely unbound from everything, from every duty, from every tradition, from every law, from every compulsion, from every power...

...and at the same time, *utterly* bound to serve *all*.

Right now you're probably thinking, "Well thanks, Pastor Ben...that's *really* helpful. You're saying we can do whatever we want because we're completely free...*but* we also have to do whatever anyone tells us to do because we're completely bound...that really clears it up for us!"

Well let's listen to a story from scripture that should help this make sense. But before we get to the story, we need some background:

In the earliest days of the church, as Christians were still trying to figure out what this new religion was all about, a number of controversies rose up regarding how believers should act.

One of these controversies was causing a division in the church in the city of Corinth.

The people were in an uproar over the practice of eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols.

So what was the issue?

In the Ancient World, one of the most common religious rituals was offering animal sacrifices.

People would bring animals to the temple, where the priests would slaughter the animals and place them over a fire, the smoke and the odor of roasting meat wafting up to the heavens.

They'd say some prayers, do some other things, and then it was done.

But, what were the priests supposed to do with all of that deliciously grilled meat lying around? It would be a shame for it to go to waste, right?

Well, many temples would host communal meals, gathering people in for a feast.

And this is where the Corinthian controversy arose: was it okay for Christians to eat this meat that had been offered to these other gods? Even though they didn't believe in those gods anymore, was it still okay to eat the meat?

After all, protein was pretty expensive in those days, so if they had an opportunity to get some, why not partake?

This is what St. Paul wrote, responding to the Corinthians:

"Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that "no idol in the world really exists," and that "there is no God but one."

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.

Food will not bring us close to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

Paul tells the Corinthian Christians that they are indeed free to eat the meat.

They aren't doing anything to harm their *own* faith because, first, they aren't bound by food purity laws, and second, they don't believe in those gods!

However, Paul *also* tells them that their own freedom in Christ does *not* give them license to ignore the faith-struggles of their brothers and sisters.

These most recent Christian converts weren't as firm in their faith as those who'd been part of the church for a longer time.

And there was a real danger that, if these new Christians saw the older ones eating this meat, they could backslide and abandon their newly-minted faith before it had a chance to coalesce.

Paul doesn't want this to happen.

He doesn't want this eating of meat to become a stumbling block for those who are weaker in their faith, so he tells the Corinthians that they are *indeed* absolutely, *truly* free to eat that meat...and *also* utterly bound to serve the weak in their community.

And so, Paul vows to *never* eat meat; he doesn't want to do *anything* that might cause one of these weaker Christians to lose their faith in Christ.

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.”

“A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

This paradox has been one of the cornerstones of our Lutheran heritage for almost 500 years, but what does it look like for us today?

In Paul's day, it looked like choosing to never eat meat.

In Luther's day, it looked like calling out the Pope on his abuses of power.

And this is the key to discerning how *we* are to live this out.

You see, both Paul and Luther understood that in Jesus' death and resurrection we truly are *free*! Christ has set us free from all the powers that threaten to keep us bound in sin, shame, and fear. Christ has set us free from *all* of it!

But at the same time, *also* through his death and resurrection, Christ has bound us to serve...but to serve whom?

Paul and Luther both answered *this* question in the same way: Christians serve the powerless.

Those new Corinthian Christians, who hadn't experienced as much as the older ones, were without power in their community. They were still susceptible to being pulled away from their new faith.

Paul's concern *wasn't* for the older, *established* Christian but for these new ones who were in danger.

The same is true with Luther. He wasn't concerned with massaging the consciences and egos of church authorities; he cared about the souls of everyday people who were being abused *by* those authorities.

So who are the powerless in *our* community that *we* are bound to serve?

Who, in our community, looks at the things we do or don't do, the things we say or don't say, the things we value or don't value, and wonders if this whole 'Christian-thing' is really all it's cracked up to be?

Who, in our community, looks at *us* and encounters *not* the freedom of the gospel, but rather *only* stumbling block after stumbling block?

Who, in our community, *aches* for us to use our voice and privilege on behalf of those who are in danger because they have *neither, pleading* for us to effect meaningful, life-giving change?

Christ has completely and utterly freed us...and absolutely bound us to serve the powerless.

So whom will *we* serve?