

*Gotta Serve Somebody*

When folk rock musician Bob Dylan was in his Christian period, he wrote a song called “Gotta Serve Somebody.” It was a pretty simple song really. In the verses he would describe different types of people. For instance, he sang, “You might wear cotton, you might wear silk; you might drink whisky, you might drink milk.” Then, in the chorus he would sing, “But you gotta serve somebody. It might be the devil, or it might be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” Perhaps not the greatest lyrics Dylan ever wrote, but a rather accurate interpretation of our reading about Christian freedom from Galatians today.

When we think of freedom we usually think of it as meaning that we can do whatever we want. I remember quite clearly when I was a kid how someone might say to another, “Don’t walk past my house,” or “Don’t swing on that swing,” and the usual response would be “It’s a free country, I can do what I want.” It still is a free country. We are free to travel where we want, vote how we want, even worship where and how we want, or not at all, if that is our choice.

But even in this free land, there are speed limits, and laws against running Ponzi schemes like Bernie Madoff did, and prohibitions against stealing and committing perjury and murder, and all sorts of other things, many of which come directly from the Ten Commandments. With freedom comes responsibility, and we usually find that God’s law very well informs us how we can best live out our freedom, both in the secular world and in our faith lives. There’s an old German proverb someone shared with me that goes: God gives Liberty; the devil gives liberties. That’s most certainly true.

A person without faith is not really free at all. We might think that it would be great to live with no inhibitions, no laws, with no one telling us what to do. We think it would be fun to just say and do whatever we feel like saying and doing, but it wouldn’t be nearly as

great as we might imagine. Think of all the young celebrities we have seen whose lives have been reduced to a shambles by shamelessly indulging in drugs and wanton sex and other vices. You can see these people in the supermarket tabloids and it's not a pretty picture. It's not such a fun, fulfilling, glamorous lifestyle. But that's what happens when people have no boundaries and just follow their own lusts and desires. That's a path that leads to disease, addiction, heartache, and eventual destruction.

St. Paul calls this self-destructive impulse, this wanton disregard of what's right and healthy, "the flesh." That needs a little explaining. On the one hand, our flesh, our bodies, were created good. We are made in God's image. Jesus took on our human flesh. The Holy Spirit chooses to reside in our bodies. There's nothing wrong with our flesh per se. On the other hand, our flesh has been corrupted by sin. The image of God in us has been marred. Our natural desires and appetites, that were created good, have been twisted by sin so that, unchecked, they can damage both us and others.

Let me reiterate that this is not to say that our bodies are inherently evil. We don't have to flagellate ourselves or wear a cilice like the albino monk in Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code to punish our sinful flesh. God doesn't require that of us. Jesus paid the physical penalty for our sins on the cross so we don't have to. We can enjoy food and drink and other physical pleasures in moderation. Human life, our life in our bodies on this earth, is good.

But at the same time, we have to realize that not everything that feels good to us is good for us or according to God's will for us. Trusting only in ourselves to decide what's right, without giving to God's Word first place, that is relying only on our own limited human wisdom and feelings rather than on Christ, can only get us into big trouble. Paul warns those who have been freed by Christ not to fall back into slavery to sin. That is a real possibility. Christians can backslide and lose their faith. We would not want to endanger our lives beyond this earthly life by rejecting and renouncing God's good gift to us.

Without faith in Christ we are easy prey for the forces of evil and we readily become slaves of sin. We become slaves to our own biases and tainted proclivities. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, “We serve the devil if we are not serving the Lord.” How can we know if we are serving God or the devil? Jesus said “By their fruits ye shall know them,” and Paul picks up that same theme in Galatians.

The consequences of our actions reveal whether our works are holy or not, rather we are slaves to Satan or servants of Christ. Paul gives a laundry list of the types of behaviors that human sinfulness produces: “fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.” He warns us that those who do these things out of a rejection of faith will not inherit the kingdom. We are saved by grace, but it is wrong for us to presume on God’s mercy and flaunt our unfaithfulness by living lives of conspicuous, unrepentant sin.

But to have faith in Christ is to be free from the power of sin. It is to be free from the compulsion to go our own way, and the freedom to follow Christ rather than indulge our flesh. In a similar way, faith manifests itself in positive outcomes. Paul names them as: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Paul says there is no law against these things. So it’s a bit of a paradox (and we Lutherans are very fond of paradoxes). When we’re doing what we want, we’re really not free; we are slaves to sin. What feels like freedom to us is really us being controlled by the power of sin. But when we are truly free, then we are free to follow Christ. Left totally on our own we could not, would not, follow Christ, and we would produce the works of the flesh we listed earlier. But when we are free, we do what Jesus bids us to do, not what our flesh demands we do. The freedom that comes with faith enables us to choose God’s way and live by His commands, and it produces the fruits of the Spirit Paul named.

But here comes another Lutheran paradox: it is also true that we are always both saint and sinner at the same time. Try as we might to serve Christ, we always all fall back into sin. And even those who are in the grip of sin, sometimes by grace find ways to serve Christ. We are stained by original sin, so our intentions are never totally pure. There is always some self-interest, some corruption, in whatever we do. But by God's grace the image of God is not totally lost in us and we are able to do good when the Spirit prompts us. That's the paradox. So what do we do with it?

The Christian life, as Luther says, is a constant turning away from sin and turning toward God. We call that repentance. The Brief Orders for Confession and Forgiveness that we have been using lately in our worship rather bluntly in describe our sinful nature and point out our desperate need for a savior, who we recognize to be Jesus Christ. We need such bluntness and directness in our prayers lest we forget that our faith is about life and death, and sin and salvation. Our faith is not, as one author (Richard John Neuhaus) put it, "asking Christ to make us even nicer people than we already are." Without Christ's intervention, we are not nice, we are not good, we cannot earn our way into heaven, and so we need to repent and here God's promise of forgiveness again and again.

Likewise, the exhortations that we have been using in the Communion Liturgy, prior to the proclamation of the Words of Institution, are there to remind us of the seriousness of the Sacrament of the Altar. It was costly grace that won our redemption, namely Jesus shedding of his own blood. We are not to take lightly the presence of the Christ in the bread and wine. They are for our spiritual nurture and sustenance. Received in faith, they pardon our sins and increase our faith within us. But, St. Paul warns the unfaithful and unrepentant who dare to commune that there are consequences for their disbelief.

There is another prayer of Confession from one of the older Lutheran hymnals that I have hesitated to use, although it is in many ways so powerful and meaningful. I have hesitated to use it not because it might offend the unrepentant but because it might terrify the consciences of the overly scrupulous faithful. It reminds those who do not truly repent of their sins and believe in Christ of the eternal dangers of their actions “ere the day of grace be ended.”

The counterbalance to that proclamation of the law, of course, is the promise of the gospel that Paul states so beautifully and clearly at the end of today’s lesson. He wrote: “[You] who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.” That is to say, that we who know Christ have nothing to fear. Our sins have been crucified with Christ. We live in a new day, a day of forgiveness. We have the promise eternal life, and in the meantime we have the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, and to guide us in serving the Lord. We “Gotta Serve Somebody” and it is Jesus whom we are serving. Thanks be to God! Amen.