

The Freedom of the Hills

^{NRS} Gal 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²

By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴ And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

Freedom, that's what this text is about. Heck, that's what this week is about. The 4th has always been one of my favorite holidays- up until last year, as long as I've been around my family always headed up to Pennsylvania to celebrate the freedom of our country by getting together, playing badminton and this weird version of croquet where instead of a nice, flat lawn, we have this giant hill you can knock people down. It was great.

Of course there are different perspectives about this freedom of ours. When I was studying Greek as an undergraduate one summer at the University of Texas I had a Welsh professor, Gareth Morgan. Gareth would sing dirty limericks down the hall as he walked and was by far one of the most interesting people I ever knew. Well, we had a test the

day after the 4th, and I asked him if I could take it on the next day. “Why is that?” he wanted to know- seemingly very angry.

“Well, it’s the 4th, sir. I’m going to be in Pennsylvania with my family.”

“Well why is THAT?”

“Well, its’ the 4th of July. Independence day?” Immediately, I knew I said the wrong thing.

“MUTINY DAY??? You want MUTINY day off?”

I have to admit, I had never really thought of it that way before. I learned that day that freedom is a complicated idea.

Freedom. Freedom. When have you felt most free in your life? I know for me some of the times I feel the most free are when I’ve got a pack strapped to my back and I’m hiking and climbing in beautiful places. There’s something so simple about having everything you need in one little bag- no paperwork, no people you have to call, just you and the 10 essentials.

Asked why he climbs, the famous British mountaineer Mallory once replied, “For the sheer joy of it, the freedom of it.”

I saw this quote from Freedom of the Hills, one of Will’s favorite books. We call it the mountain book, and that’s exactly what it is: a book on everything you could possibly want to know about mountaineering. Climbers call it the Climbing Bible- if you’re going to do anything in the mountains it’s one of those must have resources. Will has learned all about carabiners and ice axes and right and wrong way to glissade down a mountain. It’s what every 3 year old needs to know, right?

On the back you find the usual endorsements from people who think it's the greatest book ever. One of them stands out to me, though- it's by Ed Visteurs. Now, Visteurs is like a rock star in the mountaineering world. He is known as known as the foremost American climber. He's climbed all 14 of the 8,000 meter peaks- all of which are in the Himalayas. The lowest of these is Shishapangma in Tibet, which tops out at a "mere" 26,289 feet and the highest is Everest at 29,028 feet. Now, just to give you a sense of this, our own beloved Mt. Hood tops out at 11,289 feet. So, if you stacked two Mt. Hoods on top of each other- that STILL wouldn't reach the lowest of the 8,000 meter peaks. Making the feat even more impressive, Visteurs climbed all 14 without supplemental oxygen. All of you up on Mt. Hood know you huff and puff just a little bit more than when you're down here- just imagine the air at 29,000 feet!

Now, Visteurs is my favorite climber and I'll tell you why- unlike many climbers who are bold and daring and take these crazy risks and may or may not live to tell about them, Ed...well Ed has this amazing sense of perspective and wisdom about what is truly important.

To me the most telling story is one he probably thinks of as a defeat. In 1993 long before Visteurs was even a blip on the international climbing scene, he had scraped up enough money to head over to Tibet to attempt Shishapangma, the lowest of the 8,000 meter peaks, although the last to be climbed due to it's remoteness. The group he was with petered out until it was just him and one other guy. And at the final camp, Camp 4, this guy stopped as well, leaving Ed to go solo. Undaunted, Visteurs kept climbing. Going alone he went incredibly fast, reaching the central peak by 8 AM. But then his heart sank as he saw what made Shishapangma so difficult- the true summit was still 100

yards ahead, and to get there he had to cross a ridge that was as thin as a knife blade. One side of the ridge was corniced- meaning the snow hung over and you couldn't tell where the ridge actually was, which was incredibly dangerous. And on the other side, the snow was so loose it was ready to avalanche. So, with just 100 yards left, a football field, Visteurs has to make the decision of whether to go for it or turn back. Just a 100 yards left.

Think of it. He was nearly penniless, no sponsors yet. He was making ends meet by working construction in Seattle and lived in a dank basement in the bowels of a friend's house. He spent thousands of dollars to get to Tibet- all the money he had saved for the year before. Unless he made it that 100 yards, he would not be able to count this as a mountain climbed, he would have to come back.

And in an amazing, super human display of freedom- Ed turned back. He turned back.

Freedom. Philosophers and theologians tell us freedom comes in at least two varieties: freedom from and freedom for. Freedom from- these are all the things we don't have to do. Freedom for- well this is what we're made to do.

Now, we almost always think of freedom as freedom *from* something- freedom *from* the tyranny of Britain, freedom *from* our parents breathing down our neck, freedom *from* fear that keeps us from climbing mountains like Shishapangma. This is the kind of freedom that says I can do whatever I want, whenever I want. And this is a kind of freedom, but, if we only think of freedom as freedom from, we're only getting half the picture. We'll know what it is we *don't* want to do, but never what we do want to do.

And it's fine to know what you want to be free from, but wisdom comes from knowing what you want to be free for. Honestly, what good is it if you have all the time and money in the world, but don't know what you want to do with it?

This is what Paul's words to the Galatians here are all about. For freedom you have been freed, he tells them. For *freedom*- but what does this mean, freedom from or freedom for? Well both. First Paul talks about freedom from- he talks about all the things that don't control us- the things he thinks we should say 'no' to. The NRSV translation we read is so lifeless, we get words like fornication and licentiousness- Eugene Peterson does a much better job in his translation. He renders the list this way: "Repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on."

Now, I think it's easy to hear Paul sound like a kill joy here, as a kind of starchy, churchy moralist. But I don't think he is at all. He's simply trying to unmask the things our culture tells us will bring us freedom. And as you can see- things haven't changed that much in two thousand years. He's not wagging his finger at us like a school marm telling us he'll be disappointed in us if we do these things- he's saying, "Go for it. Knock yourself out. But it won't work."

My 21st birthday, and yes, I realize this may be more information than some of you want, but my 21st birthday, my friends took me out to downtown Austin, down to 6th Street. I didn't have a lot of experience drinking at that point, and so I decided it would be a good idea to just, well to just try everything. In what I would come to understand

later to be a terrible idea, I moved from a martini to a tequila sunrise to a beer like I was changing socks. And as you can guess- not only did I have too much, but mixing drinks is about as good an idea as mixing stripes and plaid, right? I ended up in bed for a day and a half. Now honestly, how fun was this? I didn't really remember much of my birthday. I felt like I had been run over by a 747 and left for dead. This wasn't fun, it wasn't free, it was painful.

And I've since come to know many so called 'free spirits' who tried to keep up this kind of life not just for one night, but every weekend, and sometimes even from night to night. Any person recovering from substance abuse will tell you, one of the reasons they quit in the end is that they just get exhausted from trying to keep up this schedule while the demands of the real world keep calling. Paula Poundstone, the comic who is in recovery from alcohol abuse, said a few weeks ago- "Do I miss drinking? Yeah, I miss drinking. But man, I don't miss the effects."

Paul's take? We're free from this. We're free from having to live like this. We can make different choices. *But*, and this is where Paul's wisdom comes in, we're only going to be free from these things when we know what we're free for.

So, Paul starts out with a list of things to avoid- but this isn't what he's really interested in. He's really interested in what brings us life.

And so he comes up with this beautiful list of markers he calls the fruits of the spirit- which incidentally you'll see surrounding the cross behind me. "Love, joy, peace,

patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Now, I love what Paul does here.

He could have been so narrow and specific here. He could have given us an easy little laundry list. Want to be happy- well here are five things to do. But he doesn't. He's open ended. We ask him- what should I do? He asks us, 'What do you love?' We say, yeah, but should I take this path- or that? He asks us, 'Which brings you peace?'

We in the church mess this up all the time- we're always trying to give folks answers. In some ways church history is just one example after another of one group trying to impose what worked for them on another. You know, just because one path worked for one group- it doesn't mean it's right for everyone else. I mentioned drinking before and alcohol is a great example. Some denominations are dry- just positive that all drinking is somehow evil. I remember having lunch with this parishioner in New Jersey. She asked me if I'd like some wine. I said sure. Then, she said, "You know, I'm Methodist. And most of our pastors don't drink. At least not the good ones." I think I said something stupid about being grateful I was Presbyterian. So some Christians are against any kind of drinking- others, like Presbyterians, tend to be much more liberal. But of course the truth is focusing on alcohol itself is a mistake- one Paul doesn't make. Paul doesn't try to give some stiff, universal rule for everyone. If we're wondering whether it's faithful to drink or not- he would put the question back to us. When you drink are you at peace? Are you gentle? Kind? Does it bring joy, real joy? For some the answer will be yes- for others no. And it's the same for any other question you have- should I marry, should I divorce, should we have more children, should I take this job? Faith isn't a kind of ouji board or magic 8 ball that will tell you what to do. Rather, faith

is this deep well, constantly asking us whether our path is bringing us peace, allowing us to be generous, and helping us to show love. And ultimately, whatever decisions we make will be ours. For freedom Christ has set us free.

Well, it took him nearly 10 years until he made it back, but in 2001 Visteurs made it back to the base of Shishapangma. I can't imagine how hard it must been to have gotten started- wondering if he was just going up to fail again. But this time everything was different. This time when he made it to the top the snow was entirely different. Using a technique called a cheval, which in French literally means by horse back, Visteurs and his partner slid up that final ridge shimmying up it riding it like a horse.

There's a picture of this in the book, and it really is pretty amazing- this freedom he was from the limitations and the fear that ground the rest of us. But for me- I'm still far more in awe of the kind of freedom he showed in 1993, his freedom from taking a foolish risk. A freedom that came from knowing deep down what he was free for. He follows two important rules in the mountains: 1) getting to the top is optional; 2) getting down is mandatory. He was able to be *free from* making a stupid choice that day, mainly because he knew how badly he wanted to be *free for* climbing again, free for going back home to his wife and beautiful children.

Freedom is more than just having the ability to do whatever it is you want, whenever you want to do it. True freedom is knowing what it is you truly want to do.

The poet Mary Oliver writes about this kind of freedom in her poem Summer:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

This week we celebrate freedom. For freedom we have been made free. The question for us is what are we free from? And what are we free for? And what are you going to do with this one, wild, and precious life you have been given? **Amen.**