

Called to Freedom

Philippians 4:10-20

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Today the Apostle Paul tells us that the secret to freedom is not to be possessed by your possessions.

Occasionally we hear that the secret to financial freedom is to get enough money, so that you no longer have to worry about it. Now it seems to me that the people who worry the most about money are the people who have the most. But when you don't have much money, it is easy to kid yourself that all your problems would go away if you just had more money.

Others aren't counting so much on their money to make them happy, but are instead collecting a different kind of currency. Some collect relationships, others prefer power, or achievement, or wonderful experiences with their families. It doesn't really matter what you collect, the strategy is essentially the same: if only you can get enough, you'll be okay. As long as you cling to what you value, you think you'll be strong enough to handle whatever challenges come along in life. "At least I have my health!" "At least I have my nest egg!" "At least I have my family!"

But it doesn't really matter what we are holding, we never feel quite strong enough. In spite of all that we have, we spend life trying to accumulate still more. And reducing your life to the effort to accumulate more is one of the best ways to lose your freedom.

According to legend, Ernest Hemingway made a practice of giving away something that he cherished on the first day of every new year because, as he said, "By giving it away I demonstrate that I owned it, and that it did not own me." As long as you have to have whatever you holding in life, you are its slave. You are not free. The secret to freedom is to find your strength not in what you hold but in the Savior who holds you.

When Paul wrote his letter to the church in Philippi, he was imprisoned. He didn't have a thing--no money, no community of friends, no prospects for a brighter future with a new company. But he concluded his letter by telling the church that he has learned something important in prison. "I have learned the secret of being well fed, of going hungry, of having plenty, and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:12,13)

This thirteenth verse is very familiar to us. "I can do all things through him that strengthens me." Unfortunately, it's often interpreted to mean that Christ will help you achieve the goals you have set for yourself. But that's not what Paul is saying. He's saying Christ will give you the strength to do what he called you to do. Sometimes we are called to give up the things we have collected in life. Things like cherished relationships, children, jobs, money, health. Sometimes we are called to receive these things as temporary gifts bestowed out of the eternal love of God.

"I know how to have little," Paul says, "And I know how to have plenty." Some people have a harder time with the plenty than they do with the little. When plenty of love is offered to them in a relationship, they sabotage it because they want to bear the pain of someone hurting them. Or when they have received plenty of blessings at home or work they can't see them because they are too focused on the flaws in these things. Or when they receive plenty of responsibility in leadership, they are frightened because they are afraid they will not do a good job.

The secret, Paul says, to holding plenty and to letting go of plenty is to find the strength of Jesus Christ the Savior. We find that strength through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who transforms us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ.

In recent years some churches have become somewhat weary of the whole notion of being strong. They think strong people are dangerous people. They have learned to look out for the weak and the downtrodden. They assume that by making the cross our cherished symbol we must always present ourselves as powerless. But the cross is not a symbol of weakness! And to be spiritual does not mean to grovel your way through life.

For the last two months I have been preaching on our calling to share in the identity of Christ. Jesus Christ is not a weak person. When the Son of God left the splendor of heaven to be born an infant, and then left his comfortable home in Nazareth to walk our dusty roads, and then allowed his love and power to be poured out into the lives of those in need, and then freely laid down his life on the cross, he was demonstrating more strength than the world has ever seen. This is the strength that the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, wants to pour into your life. This is the strength of Jesus that is given away for sacred purposes. But you cannot give it if you don't first receive it.

By being adopted into the true holy family of Father, Son, and Spirit, you have been made the heirs of God, joint heirs with Jesus Christ. As Paul told the Ephesians, every spiritual blessing in heaven has been given to you. That means you have everything Jesus Christ does. All of the power, love, and strength. All of the blessings heaven has to offer. You are a child of the Father who has called you his beloved. You are smart, beautiful, gifted, and precious. Until you have come to believe that, to receive it, you have nothing worth giving to the hungry world.

The world doesn't need your weakness or your bad self-esteem. It has plenty of that already. What good is identifying with the least, the last, and the lost in this world, when we ourselves feel least, last, and lost? That just makes for more people in trouble. No one on the Titanic was looking for solidarity. They were looking for salvation. So is the world. What the world needs is your strength and your love and your hope. The strength, love, and hope you have found by knowing Jesus Christ.

When the church constantly invites you to practice the spiritual disciplines of daily prayer and Bible reading, you are not being

encouraged to become strong in the love of Christ just because it feels good. No, it is also because the world around you needs that hope-filled strength.

For the last several weeks we've all been heartbroken to witness the violence in Israel and Palestine. I have lost count of how many times I have heard or read someone saying, "It's hopeless. Peace will never come there." But that is a resignation of weakness, and the church dares not repeat it. Maybe we are running low on political and diplomatic solutions to that conflict. But has that ever been the source of the church's hope? Absolutely not. Our hope is rooted in the empty tomb of Jesus Christ. Once Jesus the Savior has risen from the dead, there is no telling where or when or how he may appear again. There was a day when we were saying that the iron curtain was a hopeless reality in Europe. Then we said that apartheid was a hopeless reality in South Africa. Then we said that violence was a hopeless reality in Northern Ireland. But some of the churches in those places never lost hope in Jesus Christ. They kept the fire of hope burning bright, not only for themselves, but for their nations who have learned to look to the churches for a vision of a future-filled with hope.

That is what the world needs from you as well. That is what your colleagues at work need, what the newly divorced person down the hall from your apartment needs, what your cynical friends in school need. They have run out of illusions thinking that more money or more power will take care of them. They are searching for something stronger than that. They are searching for the strength that comes with all the blessings of heaven, and for hope that is strong enough not to care how things appear. That is because hope is convinced of how things will be. Our hope has little to do with circumstances and everything to do with the great faithfulness of our Savior.

So with all the strength of heaven above you and a despairing world all around you, you have to make a choice. Will you live with hope? You can decide to be pessimistic and despairing, but just remember that is a choice you are making. You could have chosen hope – for your sake, for our sake, and for the sake of a world that is dying to believe.

Lord God, give us the freedom that comes from traveling lightly through life, trusting not in what we are trying to hold, but in the strong Savior who holds us. Amen.