

This Sunday's texts:

Joshua 1:7-9

Galatians 5:13-14

Mark 12:28-31

Freedom for ...
Pastor Jim Cords
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The holy gospel according to Mark, the 12th chapter:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

The gospel of the Lord. Please be seated. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for this day. We give you thanks for your love and for the Good Word that leads and guides us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Today, we're going to look at this amazing text which is almost a summary, if you will, of the whole letter of Galatians by Paul. One of the things about Galatians I love is that instead of being written to a church, which, of course, we have learned to understand means that it's written for all of us, it's written to a region. Everybody knows right from the beginning of the letter that this is written to multiple churches throughout the region of Galatia and this theme of freedom is critically important. So let's think about what that might mean for our lives as we are also freed in Christ.

We will start that journey by looking actually at our Old Testament lesson. As we've been doing our readings, we've read through the whole book of Deuteronomy, these five sermons of Moses that are intended to set the people up before actually entering the Promised Land with Joshua. And then in our text this morning, God comes to Joshua. Now, let's remember what's going on here. They are about to enter into somebody else's land. That means they're going to *invade*. That means there is going to be an enemy that's going to fight against them. And what has God said to Joshua? Be strong and courageous. Sometimes easier than others. I want you to notice that when God says to Joshua be strong and courageous, he doesn't say be strong and courageous. I've given you great military might. You have well-trained soldiers and many more weapons than your enemy.

Sometimes life is overwhelming, not only for Joshua, but also for us. So when we hear words like "have faith" or we hear words like "be courageous," we think, well, that's easy for you to say. You're not in my position. You don't recognize my inadequacies. You don't realize how few resources I have to bring to bear on the challenge that is before me. "I just can't do it." we might say to ourselves. Possibly in those moments, that song we sang earlier will rise up in our hearts and will say "Be still my soul. The Lord is by my side."¹ Joshua is told to be strong and courageous because I am with you. You're not going into this future. You're not facing this challenge on your own. I'm going with you. And oh, by the way, be sure to do what I told you to do. Be sure to face it the way I'm telling you to face it. Be strong and courageous because I'm the leader. I'm going to take you into this. I'm going to help you to face this future.

¹ "Be Still, My Soul"

And that says something about our faith. Now I will admit that there was a time when I thought being a Christian was about going to heaven when I die, and it is. Thanks be to God. But then I began to realize that this word of being strong and courageous isn't because when you die, you get to go to heaven. It's because I'm with you today. I am with you to face the future that I'm sending you into. I've been with you prepping you for this day. I'm going to be with you as you go through it and I'm going to be with you as we walk out of it. So hear these words for yourself today. "Be strong and courageous," the Lord says to you, "for I am with you, whatever you are facing, whatever you are going through."

My life verse kind of fits in nicely to this and this is a little bit of a piece of my life verse. It says, "God has more in store than you can ever imagine. Glory to God who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus forever and ever" Ephesians 3:20-21. It's another text that promises us that God can do more than we think we can do through us. The Holy Spirit abiding in us and with us is able indeed to accomplish in our future more than we think he can. Now there have been many times in my life when I said okay, this is really good. Because this is God's promise, so dream big. Because what God will do through the Holy Spirit at work within you is more than that. Dream big because God can accomplish far more than that.

Now, I have a little caveat. It finds its roots in my prayer life because, in my prayer life, I have learned and tried to instill in others, to be honest with God. That means being honest about our sin in terms of confession, but it also means being honest with God in terms of our desires, what we want, regardless of what that is. Maybe it's the healing of a friend. Maybe it's a house. Maybe it's a job. Maybe it's a vacation. Maybe it's a honeymoon. It could be any of those things. I encourage people and I try to remember myself to just be truthful and honest with God and tell him what we want. And then at the end of my prayers, my prayers always end the same way. This is how they end and let me teach you: "In Jesus' name. Amen." Anybody else? Anybody else have the same pattern? It's good because what it means is: God, I want you to answer this request. I want you to respond to this prayer, in the character of who you are, through my savior, Jesus. I want you to give me what you know, as my loving father, what is best for me, not just give me what I asked for. Please, don't just give me what I ask for. Give me what is in the character of you, good, good God, loving Savior. You know what I want. Now answer that prayer according to your love and goodness for me.

These last two years have been tough. And you know what one of the toughest parts has been for me? Having no idea when it's going to end. Having no idea when it's going to cycle back through. I was almost discouraged reading in the news, I think it was just two days ago maybe three. I hear Dr. Fauci say we'll be ready because we may have to shut down again. I'm going like NO-O-O-O-O!!!

We don't know what the future holds, but we can believe and trust that God holds the future, the future for the world, and the future for us individually. So be strong and courageous. Walk into that future. Do what God asked you to do. Follow his promptings. Pray for forgiveness when you mess up and then boldly go where God calls you to go, trusting that he holds the future. For freedom, Christ has set us free.

Here's the problem. So we are adopting a puppy. Yeah. 8 weeks old. Itty, bitty. Don't tell Marilyn this, but sometimes when I'm referring to this, I am saying Marilyn is adopting a puppy because she's going to be home with a puppy. I have to work. But we've been paying attention

to how to train the puppy and we're learning something, that it's really good for the puppy not to have full freedom, not to be able to go wherever it wants to go and do whatever it wants to do, wherever it wants to do it, if you get my drift. Sometimes, we think that's what freedom means. Freedom is being able to do whatever I want to do. Freedom is being able to mess up my life any way I want to mess it up and it's none of your business. It's my life. I'll do what I want.

Sometimes people say of God that God loves us, no matter what we do. Can you imagine any parent loving their child so much that they don't care what they do? They don't care if they destroy their life. I love you. It's good. No problem? No. Love means caring. Love means boundaries. Love means guidance. Love means helping them to see and attain a future that will be wonderful for them and the people around them. So when we're freed from our sins, we're freed for God's purpose, for the life God created us to enjoy. It's not looking around after we're outside the prison, going "well, wonder which way I should go now?" It's about being freed from our sin, being freed from our guilt, so that we can enter God's future, doing what God has called us to do, following where God leads us to go. So the biggest challenge of our life in Christ is simply discerning what does God wants me to do today, how does God wants me to act today.

So even in Galatians, the next verse says this. In your freedom, stop destroying each other. Now, does that seem to go without saying? Anybody ever desired revenge? Even in the psalms, we hear David praying that his enemy new would be utterly annihilated. I'm thinking, you know, there have been moments in my journey where I kind of thought God, go get them. This is why I really want to encourage you, when you pray, especially about your enemies, that you end your prayer in Jesus' name so that God doesn't do what you want him to do. God does what is right for you and right for the person you're praying about. So we are freed to leave the judgment to God and live in Christ's love and freedom. What's the greatest commandment? Love God. Trust God to deal with the judgment. Trust God to set things straight and live in love. Now again not an anything-goes love, but a true love that takes the other person's life in the best interest.

I struggled for a long time with social anxiety. I'm always great when I'm there. This is Pastor Jim. He's the pastor. He's going to lead us in prayer now. I've got a job to do. Now I'm good. But if you just invite me to your party and I'm kind of wondering why I'm there, what I learned was to remember that even if I'm there and not invited to do a particular task, God has sent me there to be a blessing. I've learned to walk in the door and look around. Who can I bless? Who can I smile at? Who can I listen to? Whose presence can I enjoy being around? How might I bless them? We can use this freedom we have even in the midst of our not being quite sure what God is doing. Wherever you go today, look around, see who you can bless, see who you can courage. And for the kids that are still in the room, you guys are really, really good at this. I mean to tell you your smile to an adult lights up their life. Even if they don't know you. They'll go from a bad mood to "oh, isn't he cute?" You can transform the lives that people are in the midst of by shaking them out of their bad mood and the struggle that's before them and just giving them a moment of joy. By the way, you do that with dog training too. You know the Cesar Millan "psst." Anybody see that? "Psst." Touch him on the side and get his attention. Oh, now let's focus on what's good. Sometimes, I need someone to "psst" me. As my son would say, Dad, your face is stuck. Psst.

Let's move on. Move on and be a messenger of God's love and joy in our relationships. We don't do it perfectly, but what I want to tell you today is you're free to bless other people. You're freed and gifted and enabled, so that you can be a blessing, so that you can use your freedom to serve one another in love. And the joy of the Lord, the promise of the Lord, the love of the Lord in our lives can be our strength to do that. Throughout the Old and the New Testament, they're being asked to remember the goodness of God. Remember the provision of God. Remember the forgiveness that is yours. And as you remember that, let that joy of the Lord guide you into the lives of others, so that you can be Christ ambassadors, touching other people's hearts and lives, even if just for a moment, because you never know what that ripple effect will be.

I have, in fact, heard many stories of people who talk about how they came to Saint Timothy's. They talked about some of their early experiences, when they bumped into people like Earl or Jim, or any of the others of you and they felt at home. They felt encouraged. They felt welcomed, like they belong. These last several months when we've been trying to widen and make a little more room and make nicer that fellowship place outside, that wasn't just so that it looks good. That was so you would have an opportunity to love one another. Especially in this Covid time, that you would have an opportunity to maybe hang out and have a cup of coffee. It's okay if you don't drink coffee. I know that you're not Lutheran when you do that, but it's okay. It's alright. You can have hot chocolate or something else. It's okay. But let's not miss the incredibly powerful opportunity to love one another and especially those for whom it takes a little courage to talk to you because they're big, scary, loud, or whatever else. We are God's people. We have the strength and the joy of the Lord who says go forth loving me and loving others in my name and make an impact. Use your gifts Use your journey to bless one another.

And Judy, I just want to thank you for helping spearhead this work, to move us toward Griefshare. I know you had a team of people with you and I know Jonna was there with you, supporting you. My gosh, in this year, with all the loss we've experienced, we so need this opportunity to simply be together, to encourage, to love, and support one another.

For freedom, Christ has set you free. Use your freedom to love and rejoice and be glad. Thanks be to God. Amen.