

Sermon for Proper 8 C: "True Freedom"
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham
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The Rev. M. Lise Hildebrandt

When I was at the BU School of Public Health, one professor asked the class this question: If you could have a machine that magically whisked you from point A to point B 3 or 5 or 10 times faster than you could otherwise go—say, a trip that normally took 4 hours would now just take a half hour—how many people would you be willing to sacrifice every year to be able to use such a machine? A hundred? Fifty? One?

The answer for the United States is: 33,963. That's the number of people who died in automobile crashes in 2009. And, as a people, we're OK with that. We consider that this is an acceptable sacrifice to keep using our cars, which allow us to get around five to ten times faster than you would on a horse. That ends up being 11 people per 100,000, or 2 per year for Wareham. Catie Tropiano was almost one of our two.

But wait—the costs are higher than just lives lost in car crashes. We are in the tenth week of the largest oil spill ever from the Deepwater Horizon well. An estimated 125 million gallons of oil have gushed out of the well and into the Gulf of Mexico—and continue to flow, especially after the cap stopped working. Exxon Valdez—that horrible mess in Alaska—was only 11 million gallons. Only. Eleven men died in the initial explosion; the toll on fish, shellfish, sea mammals and turtles rises daily and threatens the ocean health over a huge area. Nearly 80,000 square miles of Gulf Waters are closed to fishing, and the shellfish industry faces huge setbacks for years. Many people are losing their livelihoods and no one knows the total effects of the pollution on human or animal life. Oil spills are part of the cost of driving cars, and these happen with regularity, though not usually in places we care very much about. Other costs of cars are the pollution we create, the people who suffer from asthma and cancer because of it, the contribution to climate change, floods, tornados, etc. , and the people who don't die but are maimed or paralyzed in car crashes.

I was also struck by an article about Foxconn Technology Group, the world's largest electronics contractor. Their factory in Shenzhen, China produces iPods, Dell computers, and Nokia cell phones. In May, yet another employee jumped to his death at the factory, bringing the suicide toll to ten for this year. Advocates say that the working conditions are terrible, with long hours, intense pressure to produce, and severe punishment for infractions. There is a 30-40% turnover rate every year. How many suicides are acceptable so that I can write my sermon on a Dell computer, or so that you can listen to music on your iPod?

This time of year, people put up American flags and get ready to party and see fireworks on July 4th, as a way to celebrate American freedom. Truly, this is an amazing country. We do have the freedom to vote, and though our political system is far from perfect, it mostly does work. We have the freedom of speech, which means that people we don't like are free to say things that infuriate us, but likewise, we can also say unpopular things without being executed. We are able to invent and innovate, to protest and change, to welcome and incorporate people from all over the globe. These are powerful goods.

But increasingly, our freedom has been channeled into the freedom to buy stuff. All kinds of stuff. Things you never even knew existed; things you never knew you needed or wanted. But we are free to buy, buy, buy. GPS, plasma screen, iPhone, iPad, iRobot, MiFi, Blackberry, SmartPhone, the latest car,

the latest fashion, and of course, all the stuff that you bought that already broke and you have to replace. This freedom comes with a cost, and I'm not just talking about servicemen and women off fighting for our country. This freedom comes with the dark underside of The American Way of Life, an underside that includes environmental costs, slave-type labor, piled-up landfills. Indeed, we would be wise to question if some of our "freedoms" aren't freedoms at all, but a kind of trap.

The Apostle Paul thought and prayed and wrote a lot about the place of freedom in the Church's early life. Paul was a good Jewish man. Truly good, according to the standards of the time. To be a good religious person, you had very clear laws—circumcise Jewish males; wear certain clothes and marks of religion; eat certain kinds of foods prepared in certain ways; pray at certain times; observe the Sabbath with worship and ceasing work every week; give a certain amount of your income and produce away; make pilgrimage to Jerusalem at least once a year, if possible; wash at certain times; treat illness in certain ways; and so on.

Paul was exemplary in following the rules. Until he was clobbered over the head by the resurrected Jesus. Paul realized that life in God was not about following rules and making yourself look good. It was about having a living relationship to God through Jesus and following his Way. In fact, the rules ended up being a trap, making you think you were in a relationship when you were not. True freedom comes from loving God and being loved by God, not by following rules.

With this transformed relationship to God, Paul took the Good News to people both inside the religion and outside. And he founded many new churches, some with Jews, some with non-Jews or Gentiles. But he runs into problems in these new churches. The Gospel of Freedom gets misinterpreted. Some, as in Corinth, thinks that freedom in Christ means they can do anything they want—no limits to their behavior whatsoever. Some, as in the churches in Galatia, think that either you can do anything you want or that people have to submit to the Jewish Law first before they can be Christians, so they are back to living by rules and trying to earn their goodness again.

It's not that Paul thinks that we don't need to follow basic rules in society, or that we should go out and break laws for the heck of it. He is talking about our grounding in life, or most fundamental orientation to God and to the society in which we live. Where is our allegiance? What freedom do we most value and are most willing to sacrifice for? For Jewish Christians, they had to decide whether to fit into society and follow the rules about eating and washing and keeping men and women separate in worship and not rocking the boat, or whether to be kicked out of the synagogue for their strange beliefs and habits, to worship differently, cross previously set social boundaries and care for others in a radical new way. Gentile Christians were invited to separate from their society's values of idolatry, carousing, and so on, and into the new freedom of Christ.

The key for us, 21st century American Christians, is that we are called into freedom in Christ over against our culture. It is "law vs. Gospel" all over again, but it's different than what I thought. It's not just about whether or not we honor American laws. Most of us are inclined to be law-abiding, and that's not a bad thing. The majority of American laws—certainly the ones that we are most aware of day to day—are fairly good and useful. What we **must** question is the overarching economic and moral system of the US—what we are expected to buy into and participate in, in order to do our part as citizens. This is American consumption—Americans primarily as consumers—whose duty is to buy our way out of terrorism, buy our way into world domination, even buy our way out of recession. Why are TV announcers so happy when Americans buy more refrigerators and TVs?

Our “law”—the way we are supposed to buy stuff—is so pervasive that we don’t even recognize it for the prison that it is. Never mind, for the moment, production and disposal is so lethal to the rest of Creation. IT DOESN’T MAKE US HAPPIER OR OUR LIVES RICHER OR OUR TOWNS AND CITIES MORE JUST! Does it? We are plagued constantly by ads. You can’t even walk into a store these days without being bombarded by videos to buy MORE! With all our technological “helps” our collective attention span has narrowed to several nano-seconds. We feel pressured to work harder to make more money to buy more stuff and that hasn’t gone away even as many of us are struggling to fill basic needs.

Jesus invites us into a place of true freedom—which is primary relationship to God. Not stuff. Not fitting in or looking good or even living up to our society’s expectations. The American Way of Life—ie buying stuff—is not going to give us freedom. It just feeds into the “desires of the flesh,” as Paul says. Enmity, strife, jealousy, envy, anger, selfishness, carousing, dissension, fornication, and the like. Rather, following Christ leads to the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the like. We are invited into freedom to love God and to love our neighbor, not to grasp after worldly stuff and be led on a quest that leads to emptiness and competition.

Our life is with God. This does not mean that we arbitrarily break laws and the rules of society. But it does mean that we need to re-vision our lives as Christians and Americans. We need to have a hard look at the costs and un-freedoms that come with our clothes, cars, and computers. Are the costs of modern life really worth it? Is this the world that we want to inhabit and perpetuate? A world of pollution, erratic weather, horrible social inequities, wars, starvation, drought, extinct species that we bequeath to our children and grandchildren?

We can’t stop being part of our society, but we can find the freedom in Christ to hold out a different vision. And to start living into that vision. I still need to go to the store and buy clothing (that was made by sweatshop workers) and food that was picked by underpaid migrant workers. But maybe I can get by on less and buy fair trade food and clothing more and more and support local farms. We need to become impervious to advertising, and to really think hard before making purchases: what are the true costs, and do I really need this, and will this lead to more love, more freedom, more justice in the world?

The church had a recent energy audit; for \$1300 we could change our lighting that would reduce our electricity by one third and our electric bill by \$1200 in a year. A no-brainer. We had the work done this week. Good Shepherd is wonderful about feeding the hungry and supporting people who are struggling. But maybe we can take one more step and find ways to reduce plastic and Styrofoam use. And another step to support jobs training for increasing energy efficiency in homes, so that more people can be employed and energy bills and energy consumption goes down. Developing a community that values human relationships over stuff, and values people and creatures around the globe, not just people right here.

We don’t have to earn God’s love and favor. But we do have the freedom and privilege to use God’s good gifts to love our neighbors as ourselves. To be filled with the fruits of the Spirit and create a more beautiful and just world.

Amen.