

Dennis the Menace is sitting in his rocking chair facing the corner. The caption under reads: “How come I get blamed for everything I do?” One of our sons could get away with almost anything. His teachers would just smile and walk away. The other would get in to trouble just thinking about doing something. One had a freedom the other didn’t seem to have. Paul, as he writes to the congregation in Galatia, notes a freedom that is ours in Christ whether you are Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female.

For Paul the freedom that we have is a freedom in Christ to be like Christ. Paul lived under Roman Law. There were distinctions in rank and privilege. Yet, in Christ we are all free. And, we have the most powerful freedom - the freedom to love. We are free to care for one another, to look after the orphan, the widow, the oppressed. We are free to pray for one another. Prayer has never been taken out of the public schools - just mandatory prayer! We are free to treat each other with dignity and respect.

I was reminded of the time we took a meal down to the Tent City in Issaquah. We served the meal in the dining room. The room was open and the people could sit and eat at the tables, etc. I did not realize that this was the exception and not the rule. Most served the dinner outside and the meals had to be taken back to their tents, etc. There was no common eating area. Many of the diners commented on how nice it was to have a table to sit at and be able to hold conversations. They lingered as long as they could - longing for the fellowship - for dignity.

The news last night highlighted a food kitchen in Kentucky (I think). They no longer have food lines with the meal being served as the men and women pass through. The diners are welcomed by a host or hostess and escorted to a table, given a menu and their food is delivered to them — just like any restaurant. Drinks are refilled by the volunteer wait staff. The change has been dramatic. Faces changed and the interaction with others was great to see. It is so much easier to share faith in a relaxed atmosphere.

We are free to treat all people with dignity and love regardless of the situation they find themselves in.

However, Paul notes the condition in Galatia is quite the opposite. The Living Bible says that they are being “critical and catty” to one another. The Message notes that they, “Bite and ravage one another.” Maybe it is human nature to be critical of anyone who is different or thinks differently than we do. It is easier to put someone down than to build them up. One of the shows on Food TV has competitors cooking against other chefs. I noted that regardless of how bad the meal may be there is always some words of encouragement and pointing out the things that were done well. Yet, we would rather find the faults than the good in another person. We may think that it makes our sins look better in light of theirs.

For Paul the solution is our understanding the freedom that we have in Christ. The Message calls us, “to live fully animated and motivated by God’s Spirit.” The Spirit does not lead in the way the world leads. The world is selfish. The freedom we have in Christ is to stop being selfish. One has noted that the root of all sin is selfishness. The Spirit comes and calls us to live unselfishly. Paul looks at what he sees as a life lived without the Spirit, without Christ. It is one that points primarily to self and selfish gains and actions. It is this that gets us into trouble and causes conflicts, wars, dissension — a “me theology”. For Paul, this is not what the Kingdom of God is like. And those who engage in such are far from the Kingdom.

Our freedom in Christ comes with the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23). This is a list that builds up one another and the church. I am not sure that the order is important except that “love”

should always be first because the rest of these really flow from love. Love empowers the other “fruits”. There is no law against the fruit of God’s Spirit. Now there may be those who consider those who follow after the Spirit crazy, but there is no law against such.

This is how Paul wants the church to be seen to the world - the way Paul believes that Christ acted in the world. This is our freedom in how we should interact with one another and the world. We spent a few days in LaConner this past week. I observed the shopkeepers. Some were friendly and welcoming. They were willing to engage in conversation and to be of any assistance they could. Others made you feel that you were bothering them by coming into their shop and intruding on their space. I noted that the friendly ones were selling more than the others.

We are free in Christ to share the fruit of the Spirit. This is how congregations/Christians should be with the whole world. Several cartoons recently of folk in worship with captions such as: “Welcome to our Church but you are sitting in my pew.” Not so far fetched. I recall a younger woman leaving worship one Easter Sunday because she came in and found strangers in her pew! They never came back. This is not the Church Christ called into being. This is not the freedom we have been given in Christ - to be exclusive.

Christ gives us the freedom to love through the power of the Spirit. His love covers their sins as much as it covers ours. We are asked, in today’s lingo, “to pay it forward.” We must be willing to forgive, which is never easy. Christ never said it would be. Yet, when forgiveness and love are experienced the true understanding of love is found. We may need it more today than ever before (probably not but it sure feels like it). Our freedom is in the ability to live out the fruit of spirit. We are free to love and live in the Spirit’s power and who knows how that may truly change the world.

NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985
NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1988