

Life is About Choices
Galatians 5:1, 13-25
The Rev. Mary Kathleen Duncan
July 3, 2022

¹For 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. ¹⁴For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ¹⁵If, 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. ¹⁷For 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. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. ¹⁹Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, 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, ²³gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. ²⁴And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Life isn't fair. That's the saying I most associate with my dad. My brother and I heard it countless times as kids. For my dad, it isn't that one shouldn't work toward fairness in life, but in his experience, the one constant of life is that sometimes, no matter what you do, the unfairness of life can rear its ugly head. For no rhyme or reason and it is best to be aware of that than to be taken under by that. I often wonder why this is his saying. I think its foundation lies in his childhood on his parents' Angus Cattle Farm. They saw unfairness all the time. You could work hard on a field and do all the right things and then the rain might not come that year. You could pour care, feed, and time into a calf and it could still fail to thrive. He saw, firsthand, from an early age that life isn't fair, and he wanted his city-raised children to be prepared for that reality.

If you asked my children, they would probably tell you that the phrase I use the most as a parent is “tough muffins”. But if I combed the depths of my heart, I think the phrase that most sums up my philosophy of living is, “Life is about choices.”

35,000

That’s the number of choices an average human makes in a day. Everything from what to eat for breakfast to where to apply for job. Who to marry, where to go to college, what to do for fun. Who will care for your child in your absence, what home to purchase, where to worship. Who to ask to the prom, how to tell someone your true feelings. What color to paint your front door, how you want to respond to conflict. How to spend your money, who to vote for. What to say when someone offers you a drink, where to go for spring break. What you think about some hot button political issue, where you see yourself in retirement. Who your doctor will be, what kind of car to drive. What sport you want to play in the fall, how you save for retirement or a child’s college fund, where you give to charity.

Choices. We make them every day. We confer with others about them. We make them in private. We make poor choices and fine choices. We make monumental choices and inconsequential choices. Choice is integral to humanity.

But then there are things that happen to us that are not a result of our choices. They are the result of someone else’s choices. Or a random converging of events. Or a natural disaster. Maybe your loved one died in car accident because the driver of the other car was drunk. Maybe your home flooded during a hurricane. Maybe you were born with a disability, or an autoimmune disease kicked in at age 20. Maybe your spouse unexpectedly left you, maybe the SAT board sent the wrong scores to your number one school. Maybe you were diagnosed with cancer in your 30’s with no family history or underlying health problems.

I recall when each of my children reached the age of about 3 and we began to empower them to make their own choices. Would they rather have an apple or banana as a snack? Would they like to wear shorts or a dress to school? Do they want to go swimming or to the park in the afternoon? Would they like this friend or that friend to come over for a playdate? They had been clamoring for the chance to make choices since about 18 months of age, but not quite ready to go out on their own. It was scary, as a parent, and it still is, to empower my children to make their own choices, but one cannot raise functioning adults and productive members of society without helping them to learn how to make choices. My parents empowered me to make choices as they raised me – more choices than they had in their own upbringing, and I want to do the same for my own children.

Choice is all over this passage from Galatians. Ben actually used this passage a few weeks ago on the Sunday we said goodbye to the Kemp family. He primarily highlighted the gifts of the Spirit and used them to talk about what God did through Mark's gifts in this place and what God can do through all of us. I wanted to expand this passage a bit so that we could see the different options we have. As humans. As Christians.

Look at verse 1 - *For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.* Do you see the choice? Paul is telling the Galatians, telling us, that we can embrace that freedom or reject it. And verse 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.* A choice is before all children of God.

Will you use your freedom for only your own benefit, or to serve others? It is important to note that the words slavery and slave that are used here can also mean "servanthood" or "servant", but I think Paul chooses a word that can mean slave to get his point across. It is a serious word with serious connotations. And we should take what Christ has done for us seriously. We should never enslave another person, but we should serve others with the utmost devotion. On this fourth of July weekend, it is also important to remind ourselves that freedom in Christ looks different than our American notions freedom. Christian freedom is first and foremost freedom to serve others in the name of God. Not freedom for individual rights or state's rights or to bear arms or to vote or to build up one's own wealth. We don't need a constitution to enumerate our rights. Jesus declared our freedom long ago and that freedom is free and ours to claim. In verses 14 and 15 – we are given the choice to love our neighbor or to bite and devour them. That imagery might sound a bit odd to our 2022 ears, but that word devour occurs throughout the New Testament. Jesus uses it a few times. And it means to "devour, squander, injure, use up until there aren't even ruins left". So, will you love your neighbor, or not? Not loving the neighbor isn't arbitrary or benign. The choice to not love your neighbor ultimately leads to the utter destruction of that human being.

And then we have the variety of choices in verses 19-25. Will you choose patience or enmity? Joy or anger? Idolatry or peace?

One of my seminary professors puts it this way,

"For freedom Christ has set us free. It is a wonderful sentence, conveying in a few short words not only a gospel claim – that Christ has set us free – but a missional cause: that our lives and actions are to reveal that freedom. What does such freedom look like? After all, Paul is soon issuing imperatives and suggesting that those who are free should make themselves slaves to one another. Apparently, Christian freedom does not look like living an unencumbered life." (Mark Douglas).

My professor put it beautifully. I agree with him, but would probably put it a bit more simply – life is about choices, and what motivates those choices.

Now, while I've felt for quite some time that this is my life motto, I haven't always been comfortable asserting it out loud. I'm Presbyterian, after all. A dyed in the wool Presbyterian. A named for two lifetime Presbyterian Women Presbyterian. A wanted to be a pastor since she was 12 Presbyterian. Presbyterians confess that we are sinners – totally depraved even – and can only do good with the help of God. We lift up the choice God made on our behalf. We baptize infants because as Ephesians 1 says, "just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ." It is not our choice that matters. It is God's! God's yes to us enables us to say yes back. So, I'm not entirely comfortable running through Falls Park, loudly proclaiming my motto – LIFE IS ABOUT CHOICES. But as I've pastored year after year, as I've loved and nurtured teenagers in the faith of Christ, as I've raised my own children, I've come to realize how very important personal choice is. Choice, when considered prayerfully, when viewed through the lens of Christian freedom, can be one's way of living out their discipleship. Will you befriend the complicated girl in your class? Your parents aren't crazy about her lifestyle, but she is in need of a good influence in her life. Will you sacrificially give to a local organization that is making a difference with those on the margins of our community? It might put a cramp on your dining out budget, but it will truly make a difference in someone else's life. Will you march for a cause that is deeply important to you, that God has put on your heart? Protests and marches have never been your thing, but maybe now is the time. Will you take your lunch hour, once a week, to volunteer at a local school? You might miss the networking opportunities in your office, but you'll make a huge difference in the lives of Greenville County students.

Pastor Carol Holtz-Martin sums up choice and its connection to discipleship this way –

"Paul is reminding us that Christ's perfect freedom engages us in a call. That call carries obligation to neighbor as well as to God, to invest ourselves in the community of faith, to put up with the sandpaper of fellow congregant's wearisome ways against the rough edges of our own unholiness."

As Presbyterians, I think we can be okay with this summation by an American Baptist Pastor. Our choices don't earn our salvation. Even when we try our very best to choose the fruits of the Spirit, our unholiness is still there. But so is God, enabling, empowering, guiding. Through the words of Scripture, God even lays out choices before us.

I don't know if y'all heard about one of the good news stories from the past week. Kevin Ford is a 54-year-old father of four and grandfather of three. For 27 years he has worked for the food service industry at the Las Vegas airport. 27 years. And he has never missed a day of work.

His story recently went viral because his daughter started a GoFundMe to raise a couple of hundred dollars for a plane ticket for him to come and visit his grandchildren. When people learned his story, they ended up donating over \$200,000 to Mr. Ford. He and his family were guests on the Today show this week and he was overwhelmed by the kindness and generosity strangers chose to bestow upon him. So overwhelmed that he was brought to tears. Kevin Ford made a choice to work in a job that many of us would consider beneath us, for 27 years. He made a choice to faithfully show up and work hard every day of those 27 years. He explained that his choice was founded in the desire to provide a stable upbringing for his four children. His job, while not the most glamorous or powerful, was steady, it provided medical benefits, and it enabled him to put his children through college. Kevin Ford was free to do whatever he wanted in life. He chose to use his freedom to take a job and faithfully work it for the benefit of others. That, my friends, is a living example of Christian freedom.

In many ways the choice is ours. But as Christians of the Presbyterian variety, we must uphold that the choice was first God's. God chose us. God chooses us. Each and every day, God says yes to us as disciples of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. "Yes, my child," says God, "you can work for my kingdom. I have great things for you to do." So, I would say, we have no choice but. As people who proclaim belief in Jesus and have covenanted to be his disciples, we have no choice but to love and serve God and neighbor in gratitude and in love. And the knowledge of that fact should inform all our choices.

A few weeks ago, a new album came out by one of my favorite country artists – Carrie Underwood. Now, if you're not a country music fan, that's okay. But have an open mind. Carrie's song, "Garden," beautifully illustrates not only our passage from Galatians, but this larger matter of choice that we've been exploring today.

*If your words were seeds that were goin' in the ground
And your love was rain farmers prayed about
If your life was sunlight we all needed
What kinda world would it be?*

*If you reap what you sow
What kind of garden would you grow?*

*Would it be warm like Eden or more like a desert?
Would the fruit be sweet or withered and dry?
Would the weeds take over 'cause it's been neglected?
Do your roots run deep, are your branches high?*

Would you plant patience?

Would you keep kindness?

Would there be peace

Ripe on the vine?

Oh, if you reap what you sow

What kind of garden would you grow?

Life isn't fair sometimes. There is pain and brokenness and things that do not make sense. There is war and famine and natural disasters. There is sin and evil and poor decisions that lead to the suffering of others. I'm living testament to the fact that life isn't fair. This past week, in our very own community, there have been heart-wrenching examples of the fact that life is not fair. But there is also God. God and God's yes that empowers us. God and God's goodness that surrounds us and calls us. Goodness that gives us no choice but to get up day in and day out and strive to be disciples who choose to follow Jesus and accept the freedom he offers, to choose to bear fruit. The fruit of the Spirit. And God promises to help us along the way. So, if you reap what you sow, what kind of garden would you grow?