

Dizzying Freedom

Genesis 2:15-17; Galatians 5:1, 13-15

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Try to remember your very first carnival as a child. Think of how all those sights and sounds made you almost dizzy with choices. I think scripture is trying to tell us something about the dizzying nature of choices in life, the amazing freedom we enjoy to choose (or not choose) God.

Freedom creates choices and choices create anxiety. Kierkegaard said anxiety is the dizziness of freedom. It leaves us with our heads spinning--all those choices! And that freedom, along with its dizziness, begins at creation. We are each created in God's image, persons of infinite worth, persons of freedom. Free to obey, free not to obey. Notice in Gen. 2, in laying out the limits to Adam and Eve, God maximizes the choices and minimizes the prohibition, while the serpent maximizes the prohibition and minimizes the choices. The entire human dilemma is defined around the notion of our free choices. Think how that strain runs throughout Holy Scripture: "Choose you this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24); "For God so loved the world...that whosoever believes..." (John 3:16); "Behold, I stand at the door and knock..." (Rev. 3).

Here's a lesson I'm constantly learning. I can't make people's choices for them. I can't help people if they don't want help. Have you learned that? That is the essence of soul freedom. Salvation in Christ is deeply personal. A relationship with Christ is deeply personal. It's about a free choice we make.

Now here's where freedom becomes dizzying. We can abuse our freedom. And we do. Tim Keller has pointed out that in previous generations, those of us in Western civilization believed it was most important to be good. In the 21st century, most believe the most important thing is to be free. But the paradox is that if we don't serve God and others, we'll never be free. We have to worship someone, something larger than our own egos [*Center Church*, p. 127]. This is why our Galatians texts are so important (read vv. 1, 13-15).

An important corollary to this personal, soul freedom is religious liberty for all, and not just for people who see things the way we do. The freedom to worship whom we want to, how we want to...or the freedom NOT to worship at all, because coerced faith is not faith. If Creator God will not coerce faith, what makes us think we can--or should? That's the miracle of our Independence Day celebrations this weekend. The United States was forged with this amazing, delicate balance. As you read your history books, you'll see that many came to the New World to escape the coercion of the Church of England, in order to worship as they chose. But once established, many of those same American colonists tried to persecute others--Catholics and Baptists--for not worshipping as THEY thought best! The persecuted became the persecutors!

Ten of the thirteen original colonies denied religious liberty and had some form of established church. Roger Williams challenged this in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and eventually left and established the colony of Rhode Island. There he founded the first Baptist Church in America. But get this. It was another 100 years before religious liberty was offered to all in America. And we've been living out this experiment in dizzying freedom for the last 239 years.

I was at a regional meeting of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship some time ago and a very wise woman led the prayer time. She prayed, "May our freedom in you lead us to love one another." Wow. She said it all. Read our Galatians text again. You see, love does not replace the law; love fulfills it and love accomplishes what the law never ever could. So here's a news flash: Love of country should never lead to hatred of others!

A 1958 film depicts this truth for us. Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier starred in "The Defiant Ones," a story of two escaped convicts, one black and one white, chained together and on the run. They had to get along. They had to work together. In one scene, they have fallen in a deep ravine with steep, muddy, slick sides. One of them claws his way to the top and is almost out, but cannot do it, because he is manacled to the other. They finally realize the only way up and out is together. In our nation, in our world, the only way up and out is together [I am indebted to Desmond Tutu for this illustration, *God Has A Dream*, p. 27]. The only way to be all that God created us to be; the only way to be free; the only way to national salvation--together. The only way to keep our balance in the dizzying freedom God has given us is to walk in Christ.