

**Bridging Our Divides:
Why Liberals and Conservatives Need Each Other
Part 3: Freedom
Rev. Dr. Chris Alexander
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Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-14 and Romans 8:35-39

I. Freedom

Scripture: Galatians 5:1, 13-14

1 For 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. **14** For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In this worship series devoted to the discussion of the book by Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided By Politics And Religion*, we are dealing with what Haidt calls "the six moral tastebuds/foundations" that describe the values of people with a particular "leaning" toward specific moral receptors. These receptors, in turn, are then used to determine our political action in our shared society. The first week of our series we discussed the "Fairness/Cheating" moral foundation and described the difference in understanding fairness through egalitarian perspectives as well as seeing it through the lens of proportionality. Last week we discussed the "Care/Harm" foundation which Eric referred to as "Compassion." In this discussion, Eric spoke to Haidt's understanding that those who might identify themselves as liberals or Democrat, often place a very high value on this foundation (together with the fairness and liberty foundations), while those who might self-identify as conservatives or Republicans tend to lift all six of the moral foundations up, in equal amounts, to inform their decisions and determine their actions. Today we will discuss Haidt's understanding of the "Liberty/Oppression" foundation which we are calling "Freedom."

For Haidt, the difference between the two ends of the spectrum of political and societal perspective is not about freedom in itself, but rather what we are freed from and freed for. The trigger for this moral foundation is "anything that is perceived as imposing illegitimate restraints on one's liberty." For those who self-identify on the liberal end of the spectrum and who place a very high value on the care/harm foundation (compassion), this means protecting the powerless from abuse and caring for those whose voice is not heard well in the halls of authority. These folks can be found fighting

for human rights and social justice, by working toward a more equitable system for all individuals within our society.

Those who self-identify as conservatives and tend to place an equal value on all six of the foundations, also speak up against oppression and tyranny. Their conversations, however, tend toward protecting their groups and associations rather than the individual. These folks do not respect outside regulations on their families and businesses, and mistrust when government oversteps its authority to impose dominance and power over those earning their own way. Haidt says that this side of the spectrum places their emphasis on "liberty" rather than "equality" and values the understanding of self-determination.

Both ends of the spectrum understand and value the essence of liberty versus oppression, but each have a different understanding of what triggers a threat to their liberty, and how that liberty is lived out in their everyday lives. Those who place a very high value on compassion see individuals freed from oppressors that would otherwise limit their opportunities to contribute to society in their own way. Those who value all six foundations seek liberty from an authority that limits the conservative work ethic by imposing regulations at redistributing the wealth to those who do not contribute equally to the whole. Both will come together in fighting oppression, but differ in how they use the freedom they gain from the struggle.

One way of describing this moral foundation might be to look at a current issue of liberty which is interpreted differently from the two perspectives: Colin Kaepernick (an NFL quarterback) taking a knee during the national anthem, while his teammate (a former marine) stands with his hand over his heart. There have been several responses to Colin's action, each with elephants stampeding toward liberty, but from very different perspectives. One meme shared by my niece on Facebook tries to describe the conversation between the two sides of liberty:

I stand to honor the promise the flag represents.
You kneel because that promise has been broken.
I stand to affirm my belief that all are created equal, and to fight alongside you for that promise.
You kneel because too few stand with you.
I stand because we can be better.
You kneel to remind us to be better.
I stand to honor all that have fought and died so that we may be free.
You kneel because not all of us are.
I stand because I can.

You kneel for those who can't.
I stand to defend your right to kneel.
You kneel to defend my right to stand.
I stand because I love this country.
You kneel because you love it too.

-written by: Andrew Freborg

When we look to our religious tradition to speak to these differing interpretations of liberty, we hear St. Paul's words to the community at Galatia which was struggling with whether you needed to become a Jew before you could be considered a follower of Christ. Paul tells them "For freedom, Christ has set us free." For Paul, this means that there is no right way to behave in order to earn Christ's identity in your living. In living we become what Christ calls us to be. It is in order to live in freedom we are set free, so we should not be freed only to submit to any one particular construct or concept that limits who God created us to be. Do not give in to the identity someone else places on you, but rather seek the activity of God to which you have been called.

This definition of freedom in Christ that Paul proclaims to the Galatians does not imply that "freedom" means that you can do whatever you want, but rather, the identities given to you by others can be dropped, to reveal that which God calls you to be: "slaves to one another...loving your neighbor as yourself."

How do Paul's words about the Love of Christ provide insight into our differences and grant us freedom to live together, even in the midst of those differences? If we are living into our freedom in Christ then we are free to love each other without restraint. We are free to hear our neighbor's stories of joy, without receiving them as a threat to our own stories. We can be neighbors proclaiming our joy in the very lives we live with one another.

While we listen to our musical offering, think about a time when you were moved by the story of another. What themes were represented in their joy? What theme or emotions did their story invoke in you? And how was your story touched by theirs?

II. Telling Our Story

Scripture: Romans 8:35-39

³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor

rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The freedom we receive in Christ is that we are loved beyond our wildest imaginations and that nothing can separate us from that love of God in Christ. This is truly freedom for freedom's sake. Nothing we do, or don't do, determines God's love for us. This love is predetermined within all of creation. Martin Luther says it this way, "God doesn't love us because of our worth. We are of worth because God Loves us."

In this freedom, we are no longer slaves to labels like "liberal" or "conservatives." Nor are we slaves to making sure everyone else gets their part right, as well as us getting our own parts right. We are freed to listen to one another, live with one another, explore the complexities of life with one another. We are freed to actually expect and hope that we do (and will) think differently from one another in our wide range of diversity. We are not defined by what others determine we should be, but rather we are defined only in that we are loved, and able to freely love others in return.

Do you believe it? Do you live it?

If we do not need to concern ourselves with living a particular way that will be pleasing to God in order that we do not burn eternally in the fires of hell, think of the freedom that this presents to us. It's enough, if we actually believed it and lived it.

But it's also a bit overwhelming too, isn't it? If the constructs we have built around us to help us determine our worth don't matter, how do we define ourselves? What will help us discern what actions we should be taking? Honestly, I feel like I'm in my eighth-grade counselor's office all over again, being told "You can be anything you want to be – What will you choose?" I don't know about the rest of you, but for me that is a terrifying memory!

How do we move at all with such a freedom as this? Where can we begin? Our favorite poet David Whyte has a poem to help us with this. When we are facing an endless array of possibilities and are literally paralyzed by such a broad expanse of freedom, Whyte tells us to "Start Close In:"

*Start close in,
don't take the second step or the third,
start with the first thing close in,
the step you don't want to take.*

*Start with the ground you know,
the pale ground beneath your feet,
your own way of starting the conversation.*

*Start with your own question,
give up on other people's questions,
don't let them smother something simple.
To find another's voice follow your own voice,
wait until that voice becomes a private ear
listening to another.*

*Start right now
take a small step you can call your own
don't follow someone else's heroics,
be humble and focused,*

*Start close in,
don't mistake that other for your own.
Start close in,
don't take the second step or the third,
start with the first thing close in,
the step you don't want to take.*

St Francis of Assisi said something similar when he said, "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible." Our local schools have taken to using the phrase "In a world where you can be anything – be kind."

For me, looking for how I ought to be participating in what God is already doing in the world, I tend to look close to home. And for our congregation this means participating as the Christian presence in the Tri-Faith Initiative. I remember sitting and listening to the Jews, the Muslims and the Episcopalians sharing their stories with us as we were discerning our participation with them. They each began their own story about how they became involved with the other, then how one thing led to another, and then all of a sudden, the Tri-Faith Initiative came into being! The joy radiating from each of them as they shared their story was incredible. Then someone would continue by saying, "remember when..." and then they would tell a shared story about something crazy that happened along the way, and they would laugh together like old friends reminiscing something sacred to who they were becoming. It was marvelous to watch!

I remember thinking to myself, "I can't wait to be on that side of the story! I can't wait until it's my turn to tell how Countryside became involved with the Tri-Faith!" And now I am the one telling the story!

I've spoken to many groups of people over the last couple of years explaining who we are as a Tri-Faith Partner, how we got there, and what our dreams for the future of Tri-Faith are. Many of the groups I speak with are other Christian groups, but from a wide spectrum of theological understanding and tradition. So, when I mention the understanding we have with our Tri-Faith partners for "not proselytizing," I find I am drawn into a much larger discussion on the difference between proselytizing and evangelism.

For many within our Christian tradition, their identities are determined in part by sharing the story of God for the purpose of recruiting disciples to the faith. When I mention to these Christians that we have agreed, from the outset, not to do this in our relationships with our interfaith partners, our brothers and sisters in Christ are taken aback, and are readying their quivers to begin their attack.

Proselytizing has the purpose of conversion from a "false" faith tradition into "the one, true faith" that will save your soul. It has at its core the assumption that there can only be one "right" or "true" faith, and that the person doing the talking is the one who is the true believer. All other faith traditions or conversations about God are considered irrelevant at best but, more often, as evil incarnations that lead the weak astray. In many traditions, this type of conversion conversation is called "evangelism," and is why folks who participate in this type of conversation with others, are referred to as "evangelicals." But I would suggest a different definition of this term.

Evangelism comes from the Greek word εὐαγγέλιον which means "to proclaim the good news" or to be a "messenger of the good news." The Gospel writers of the New Testament are referred to as "Evangelists" as they share the Good News of Jesus. They are messengers of the story of Jesus. This understanding of sharing the Gospel leaves the "conversion" responsibility to God. We are called to simply tell our story. Our stories are inextricably wrapped up in God's story, and when told through the joy that comes from living into this shared story, God's love is shared within the telling of it. We are the messengers of God's story, and our lived stories are how we share that with one another.

This understanding of evangelism places the responsibility of converting people to a certain belief in God's hands, not ours. We are free then to share our stories from our joy, and more importantly, freed, then, to hear others share their stories without judgment or feeling threatened. I believe this to be the marvelous power of our Tri-Faith relationships. Because we

don't have to worry about who is right or wrong, and because it's all about sharing God's story, we are freed to listen and to share with one another without drawing a line in the sand. What a gift of freedom this is.

If we can find the joy in this distinction within our Tri-Faith relationships, then we are better able to recognize the possibility of breaking free from our political stereotypes and labels long enough to listen to the "other" and willingly share from our own experiences and perspectives without being combative or defensive. This is the type of conversation we are trying to encourage with one another by lifting up this freedom we have been given in Christ. Being freed for freedom is the gift Christ gives us to break through our divisiveness and polarization to begin building bridges of hope and peace.

We are loved beyond our wildest imaginations... And nothing can ever separate us from this love in Christ Jesus.

Through being loved, we are freed to love one another.

For Freedom Christ has set us Free – Believe the Good News.

Amen