

The Paradox of Freedom and Love

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"I demand unconditional love and complete freedom," the poet Tomaz Salamun wrote. He went on, "That is why I am a terrible person."

There is this paradoxical relationship between love and freedom. On the one hand, you can't have love without freedom. I mean think about it like this:

The reason love is so powerful is because we choose it. If we were forced to love, if we had no choice in the matter, then that wouldn't actually be love. That's why free will is such an important part of our faith. God gives us the choice to love God or not, to accept God or reject God. And if you stop and think about that for a minute, the implications of God giving humanity freedom is mind blowing because it means, in gifting us with freedom, God opens God-self up to being hurt.

One of the dominant images of God in the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures is that of a heartbroken lover. Because God loves us so much, God gives us the freedom to not love God in return. Love is inherently risky, but it has to be. To try to remove the risk from love, to try to remove the freedom for one to accept or reject love means that whatever the nature of that relationship, it would not be one based on love. It would be based on compulsion or force and love never ever compels us to do or be anything. Love always respects the agency of the other.

The moment we start to think, "If they do this, or if they will act in this way, or if they will be this kind of person, then I will love them," we are not acting out of love. Love is unconditional. Period.

Now let me qualify this for just a moment as an aside. That doesn't not mean the relationship will always continue. Love does not mean we subject ourselves to abuse – physical or emotional. But it does mean that to love means we accept that the one or ones we love might not respond to our love the way we want.

Perhaps the greatest mystery of our faith is that the God who created the universe loves us...without condition. And maybe the greatest implication of that love is that God gives us freedom to return God's love or not. As Paul says: "For freedom Christ has set us free."

And that was a message the church in Galatia needed to hear because they had been told that God's love was conditional. They had been told things like:

"God will love you if you will eat the right kind of food."

"God will love you if you adopt the practice of circumcision."

"God will love you if you do this or if you do that."

And that message of God's love being conditional has continued even to this present day. June is LGBTQ pride month. In my last church I served in Birmingham, about 1/3 of our congregation were people from the queer community. And do you know what message they heard over and over again:

God will love you if you will deny who you are.

That message of God's love being conditional has harmed LGBTQ people over and over again, a version of that message, maybe not always couched in religious language, is one we all hear from time to time...the message that we have to do something to be worthy of love.

If you were more successful at your job, then you could be loved.

If you were more attractive, then you could be loved.

If you were smarter or more talented, then you could be loved.

We hear these messages all the time...these messages that try to make us believe that love is conditional and that we must do something more, or be somebody different to be worthy of love.

So let me say this...every one of those messages is a lie. You are worthy of love just for who you are. You don't have to do anything, you don't have to be anybody else other than who you are, to be worthy of being loved.

God loves you because you are you...full stop, period.

That message, more than anything else, is what Paul wanted the readers of his letter to the Galatians to understand.

But he also understood that in emphasizing freedom so much, some might misunderstand him to think that he was implying that we can do whatever we want. And this is where the paradox of love and freedom comes in. As I said, you can't have love without freedom. But also, I'm not sure we truly love if we're not willing to accept limits on our freedom. In other words, because we love, we know that our actions and our choices impact others and so we don't act without taking into account how our actions might affect not only ourselves but other people in our lives. We don't often think about it this way, but marriage vows are a commitment to living with limits and boundaries... "forsaking all others," is a promise to accept limits. We promise to give up our freedom to pursue romantic relationships not because we suddenly are no longer attracted to others but because we love the one we've married. Because we love, we choose to give up some freedom.

The same with having kids. For anyone who is a parent, you know that your world changes drastically when you have kids. You can no longer do just whatever you take a whim to do because you have people depending on you. Our schedules often revolve around our kids' schedule. Because we love them, we choose to give up some freedom.

Paul chooses to use the strongest word possible to describe this relationship of love and responsibility. "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." The Greek word for slave is "doulos." Become a "doulos" to one another, slaves to one another, he says. But what's fascinating is that in this same Scripture, he earlier said, "do not submit again to the yoke of slavery." Do not submit again to the yoke of being a doulos. Do you see the paradox. Don't become a doulos again. Be a doulos to one another.

For Paul, the way to live into this paradox has everything to do with love. Reject any and every theology that tries to force you into being someone you are not, that tries to tell you God's love is conditional. Never ever take up that yoke. But also, know that the way we live, the choices we make have consequences that impact others. And precisely because we love them we will not live in such a way that hurts them if we can help it. We will give up our freedom not because someone is forcing us or because we're trying to prove we are worthy of love or so we can be accepted. Rather, we will give up some of our freedom because we do not want to hurt those we love.

But so far, the examples I've talked about are individual. We willingly give up some of our freedom because we love our spouse, or because we love our children, or because we love our friends. But early Christianity did not develop in an individualistic culture. It developed in a communal culture where the dominant question was never what is good for an individual but always what is good for the community. How we navigate the paradox of love and freedom is about far more than how we interact as individuals but it has everything to do with what kind of society we want to be a part of.

A number of Christian theologians define social justice as love distributed. Precisely because the gospel was written in a communal culture is why we must remember that the teachings of the New Testament are never just about how we treat individuals but about how we build a society where love is distributed to all. And to that end, maybe if I could have recommended that our society as a whole have read one book of the Bible over these last few years, it would have been Paul's letter to the Galatians.

So much of the debate has broken down over questions about what the government can and can't tell us to do. The government can or can't tell us to wear a mask. The government can or can't tell us to get vaccinated. There are certainly policy debates to be had and with any law or policy, lawmakers must wrestle with the tension of individual freedom and the common good. In so many ways, where to draw that line between freedom and the common good is the work of politics – I don't mean partisan politics in the sense of getting my people elected, but rather politics as defined as how we are going to order society.

In that understanding of politics, the gospel is inherently political—not partisan, but political. There are profound implications not only for how we treat one another as individuals but the society that we get to help build and form. Paul is helpful here as he gives us a pretty clear criteria to guide our work...something commonly called the fruits of the spirit:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The question we must all ask is not, “Am I free to do this or not do this?” Rather the question we must ask is “Will this action, will this policy lead to more love, more joy, more peace, more kindness, more gentleness for all people?” If it will, then it is absolutely worth pursuing even if it means sacrificing some of our freedom.

And here’s the thing, when we act of love, it doesn’t really feel like a sacrifice precisely because we are created for loving relationship and loving community. The truth is that contrary to the poet’s desire, we can’t have unconditional love and absolute freedom because when we love another, it means that our freedom always comes with responsibility. Freedom does not mean we do whatever we want, whenever we want regardless of the impact it has on others. Rather, the gift of freedom to which Paul refers is always paired with love, so that we utilize our freedom not only for our own benefit, but for the sake of others.

Freedom is indeed the air love breathes. And precisely because we love, we choose to accept limits on our freedom.

For Christ has set us free...

and through love we become bound one to another.

Both are true. Both are the gospel. Amen.