

Dwelling: Freedom Galatians 3:1-5, 13-14

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I love the movie *Shrek*. Aside from being incredibly funny, Shrek is filled with all sorts of truths about life. Including this one: our assumptions about people are often wrong. Shrek is an ogre. He's big and green and he lives in a swamp. And so, everyone just assumes that Shrek is a monster, intent upon, as Shrek puts it, "decapitating people, putting their heads on pikes, cutting open their spleens and drinking their fluids." But as we come to know Shrek throughout the movie, we discover that in reality, Shrek is a big softie at heart. Shrek has an image problem.

Truth be told, so does God. From the earliest days of recorded history, people have assumed that God is angry, vengeful and anxious to punish. We can imagine people thousands of years ago experiencing a violent thunderstorm or an extended drought that has a whole population teetering on the edge of starvation and assuming that the God who controls all things has a mean streak, or perhaps is punishing them for some sin they've committed. Perhaps they need to offer a sacrifice to atone for their sins. If trouble continues, maybe it even needs to be a human sacrifice. Just as people lived in fear of Shrek, for thousands of years people lived in fear of the God they could not see.

And then along came Jesus. As people experienced Jesus' life, death and resurrection, they came to believe that Jesus was God-in-the-flesh. The witness of the early Church is that the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Jesus, the invisible God made visible. In Jesus, people could see the heart of God, and the heart of God is not wrath and vengeance, but love and grace. For centuries people had tried to walk a fine line of obeying rules and regulations to earn God's favor and avoid God's anger, but in Jesus they were set free from all of that.

But as wonderful as freedom sounds, it's also hard to believe. We like to say that there's no such thing as a free lunch, that if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. And even people in Jesus' day knew

that, and so they struggled to believe that they were truly free in Christ. Free from the notion of an angry, vindictive God. Free from a life dictated by strict obedience to stringent laws. Free from having to hustle for their sense of worth. Free to live a life of love and joy and gratitude. And so some in the early Church continued to obey those laws; laws about what to eat, with whom you could eat, and what you could and couldn't do on the Sabbath. All done out of fear of a God that they imagined to be angry and vengeful.

St. Paul, who pastored so many of those early Christians, found that pattern disturbing. Not only did he grieve that people were rejecting a life of freedom for a life of bondage, but in Paul's mind to rely upon the law to earn God's love and favor was a denial of the Gospel itself. And so, Paul wrote letters to those early Christians to set them straight and to call them back to freedom. Today's Scripture reading from Paul's letter to the Church in Galatia, is a great example:

¹ Oh, foolish Galatians! Who has cast an evil spell on you? For the meaning of Jesus Christ's death was made as clear to you as if you had seen a picture of his death on the cross. ² Let me ask you this one question: Did you receive the Holy Spirit by obeying the law of Moses? Of course not! You received the Spirit because you believed the message you heard about Christ. ³ How foolish can you be? After starting your new lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort? ⁴ Have you experienced so much for nothing? Surely it was not in vain, was it?

⁵ I ask you again, does God give you the Holy Spirit and work miracles among you because you obey the law? Of course not! It is because you believe the message you heard about Christ.

¹³ But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." ¹⁴ Through Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith.

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Did you catch what Paul is saying here? He's reminding those early Christians that the new and joyful life that they were experiencing didn't come from obeying

the law, but by entrusting themselves to the Good News of God's love revealed in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. *"Why," Paul says, "would you ever return to a life of bondage to fear when you've already tasted the freedom of the Gospel?"*

Imagine someone languishing in a prison cell, and suddenly someone comes along and unlocks the door and says, "You're free." Stunned, you walk out of the prison and step outside. You feel the sun on your face and feel the wind in your hair. It's glorious! And then you turn around and walk back into your cell. That makes no sense, does it? And yet that's what the Galatian Christians were doing. Rather than living in the freedom of God's love revealed in Jesus, the Galatians were returning to the prison of trying to earn God's love by obeying the law.

Now, before we shake our heads and wag our fingers at those foolish Galatians, let's be clear – many of us do the same thing. Don't think you do? Ask yourself:

- Have you ever gone through a difficult season of life and thought to yourself, "Why is God punishing me?" or "Why has God abandoned me?"
- Have you ever thought to yourself, "I don't really want to go to church today or read the Bible today, but God will be unhappy with me if I don't"?
- Have you ever found yourself working hard to earn your sense of self-worth?
- Have you ever met someone who might just qualify for sainthood and thought to yourself, "God must love them more than me"?
- Have you ever wondered if you've done enough or been good enough to get into heaven after you die?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, then you've got a little Galatian in you. Truth is, most of us do! But here's the Good News – God knows and God loves you and God forgives you. That's the freedom in which we live. The freedom to live in God's love and grace and not in fear.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes these powerful words, *"The Lord and the Spirit are one and the same, and the Lord's Spirit sets us free."* The Spirit who dwells within each one of us is constantly reminding us that we are free, constantly calling us out of the prison of trying to earn God's love and forgiveness and calling us to live on the wide open plain of God's grace.

If you purchased a new car in the last year or two, you might be familiar with this new feature that takes a

bit of getting used to. Whenever you get too close to the line on the left or the right of your car, the steering wheel vibrates and your car automatically steers back to the center of your lane. I'd suggest that that's not unlike what the Spirit does in our lives. Whenever we begin to drift out of the freedom that is ours in Christ, whenever we veer too close to the line of thinking we need to earn God's love and forgiveness, the Spirit calls us back into the freedom that is ours in the Gospel.

So, here's what I want you to do this week. Pay attention to your "shoulds." Every time you think that you "should" do something, pause and ask yourself why. Invite the Holy Spirit to help you get clear on the real reasons you think you "should" do something. If the reason is that it's the right thing to do and will bless and enrich someone else's life or your own...by all means, feel free to do it. But if the real answer is because you're afraid that God will be disappointed in you or love you less if you don't, or you think God will love you more if you do...don't do it. Let the Holy Spirit breathe into you the truth of the Gospel, that you are loved, you are forgiven, and you are free.

You are not a prisoner. You are not a prisoner to fear or guilt or shame. You are not a prisoner to the failures of your past. You are not a prisoner to the hamster wheel of trying to earn your sense of worth. You are not a prisoner to the lie that you are what you do or you are what you own. No, you are not a prisoner. You are a child of God, set free from everything that binds you.