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Sixth Sunday of Easter

**St. Paul's (WELS) Moline, IL**

3:19

**The Christian Life of Freedom...**

A. *Is lived faithfully.*

B. *Is lived lovingly.*

C. *Is lived boldly.*

Acts 15:1-2,22-29

Earlier this week an unusual event happened in the investment world. On an otherwise uneventful day completely unexpectedly the stock market lost roughly a thousand points or a little under 10% of its entire value. What happened? Well that was the problem, nothing happened, or rather no news of any kind explained what happened. A follow up investigation revealed that what may have happened was that a single order to sell a large number of shares of a well known company was entered in the billions of shares and not millions. One mistake with big consequences. Today we are reminded that all of our actions, great and small do have consequences--some are good and a blessing, others can be bad even deadly spiritually and otherwise.

The account from the book of Acts is very straightforward. In the city of Antioch to the far north of the Holy Land, almost to the point of where modern day Turkey lays some people without the blessing of the apostles came from Jerusalem with what seemed like a simple and reasonable teaching, but a teaching so dangerous in its effect that it could have eliminated the Gospel. What was this teaching so dangerous? **“Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.”** (verse one).

What is the big deal? It is not like these individuals were adding a bunch of new commandments or teachings that were in any way contrary to what the people of God had known and practiced up until that point. It is good to point out that these individuals were not coming to Antioch and saying that Jesus was not real, or that He was not God, or that He did not die for the sins of the world--they accepted all of these teachings. All they were simply teaching was that in addition to faith in Jesus, believers needed to keep the Old Testament command and practice of circumcision--the very tradition going back to Abraham as a sign of faithfulness and allegiance to God. What is the big deal?

The big deal is the word “plus.” No that word is not used in today’s text but it is there--it is the heart of the controversy. The heart of the controversy was that false and anti-Christian teaching that salvation is the result of the cross of Jesus Christ PLUS, in this case circumcision. You need to believe in Jesus AND you need to be circumcised. That was the false message and that was the threat to everything Jesus taught. Why? If this would be acceptable and true then it the only possible conclusion is that the cross of Jesus Christ, the death of the Son of God is simply not enough to get one into heaven. No other conclusion can be reached. Yes, even if it is the cross of Christ plus one thing, one little thing, then salvation is not dependent

totally and completely on Jesus’ death and resurrection to new life. Furthermore, it would be contrary to the very simple words of Jesus Himself.

Jesus said: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** (John 3:16). Jesus also said: **“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”** (John 5:24). Jesus said it all: it is belief alone, faith alone in the message of Jesus that saves completely and entirely from death, and eternal separation from God. That is why Jesus declares: **“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”** (John 8:36).

Paul and Barnabas who were in Antioch knew full well how dangerous this false teaching that demanded circumcision was and how utterly destructive it would be to the very gospel itself. It was for this reason that Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem with the blessings of the Antioch Christians to address this problem.

Paul and Barnabas went to the Christian leaders at Jerusalem: they went to the Apostle Peter and they went to Jesus’ brother James, head of the Jerusalem church. Interestingly Paul and Barnabas were not the only voices there at Jerusalem because Luke, the author of Acts tells us that: **“some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”**” (Acts 15:5). The conclusion and the voice of the church was clear and unanimous. Luke tells us what Peter said: **“Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”** (Acts 15:7-11).

Peter spoke clearly and definitively: people are saved by God’s grace and not through the works of any law. People are saved by the message of Jesus dead now raised, plus nothing else. It is the gospel of Jesus plus nothing--this is what saves us. This is why Paul, not once but twice in the book of Galatians references how circumcision has no bearing on salvation. What does Paul say? **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”** (Galatians 5:6). We could replace that word ‘circumcision’ with so many things and it means the same thing.

As we continue our Easter celebration we are called to be ever clear and ever vigilant on what the Gospel is and what it does: it alone, plus nothing else saves. This then leads us to a curious observation: why do the church leaders at Jerusalem say what they say in the letter that is sent to Antioch?

The letter is as follows and is part of today’s text:

**Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul-- men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of**

**mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.** (Acts 15:23-29).

Doesn't it seem as though the apostles failed in proclaiming the full freedom and power of the Gospel? It seems as though the leaders at Jerusalem were adding laws necessary for salvation. It seems as though they were saying: believe in the Gospel of Jesus plus... Why did they give these requirements in the way that they did? Furthermore, why did they specify these things--food sacrificed to idols, from blood and from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality? What, if any, is the rhyme or reason to this list?

The answer is that the leaders at Jerusalem said these things precisely because they were writing a letter to the Christians at Antioch and not simply to the whole church. In other words, the Jerusalem leaders were telling the Antiochian Christians how to express their Christian freedom. The prohibitions were given only because the leaders knew the situation at Antioch and the dangers those Christians faced.

At Antioch there would have been many opportunities for eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Could the Christians have eaten such meat in faith and not jeopardize or damage their relationship with Jesus? Yes. But they could not have acted that way without damaging the faith of others. And here is the point of Christian freedom: Christians have been freed from any and every rule and regulation because Christ frees them from everything yet Christians are called to use and live their freedom in a way that is most beneficial for others around them. The freedom of Christian life is always to be lived in a loving way towards others.

Can I as the pastor drink a beer in my freedom as a Christian? Yes, of course I can, because abstaining from alcohol does not make me any holier or closer to God. Yet, if I am in a situation where I am in public or there is a person who is around me who struggles with alcohol then I am going to live my Christian life in freedom in a way most helpful and beneficial to others. If, for example I am in a part of the country where the culture states that Christian ministers do not drink alcohol then if I am in a public place then in my freedom I will specifically not drink alcohol, simply because I do not want to hurt or offend another, especially someone whose faith would be damaged by such an action. Likewise I will not have an alcoholic beverage in a setting where I know someone struggles with alcohol and he or she may be tempted or hurt by such an action.

We dare not encounter today's text from the book of Acts as merely a defense of our Christian freedom from attacks of legalism. To be sure that is in our text and we must defend the completeness of Jesus' death and resurrection as enough to save us simply when we believe that. However, there is much more to today's text. As Christians we are not merely playing defense, protecting our doctrine and our message from attack but we are God's witnesses, His spokespeople for the entire world. As such we are to live our lives boldly in the freedom and the power of the Gospel and that is something we do not want to overlook.

In our Christian freedom we can encounter and engage virtually any situation or culture or environment and make a difference. This was a key to Paul's

great success. Yes, Paul never abused his freedom but he used it fully so as to win as many people to the Gospel as he possibly could. No better statement captures Paul's philosophy as his own words do in 1 Corinthians chapter 9:

**Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.** (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

Does this mean that Paul was in some way two faced or wishy washy or a shallow person? Absolutely not. What Paul did do was use his freedom to glorify Christ. Today, that is exactly what we can do too. It is this kind of bold life using all we have at our disposal that lays at the heart of Jesus' parable of the man who stored up all his earthly treasures in barns. (see Luke 12:16-21). When the man stored up all his earthly treasures and did not use them he lost everything. Our possessions include earthly goods but it also includes our time and it also includes opportunities for getting the gospel message out.

A very good example of this and one that is very real and before us this week is the upcoming Craft Fair that will simply be held on our church grounds. This is a wonderful opportunity to get word out about our school, our church, and of course most importantly the message of Christ out to people. Some people think this is a great idea, some may have concerns or uncertainty. Some important things should be noted: first, this is not a church event but it is an event happening on our church grounds. Second, this is not something we are doing for the sole purpose of raising money but it is an opportunity for a blessing to come our way. Because there is no blurring of religious teaching or such there is nothing prohibiting us from allowing this to happen on our church grounds and to also take that opportunity to inform others of our church and school subtly through flyers and such.

Having said this, would it be possible for something like this to get out of hand and become a problem? The answer is yes. It would certainly become a problem if it detracted from our main mission as a church. It would also be a problem if it blurred our mission to other people who would begin looking at us as more of a business than a place of worship. Finally, it would be wrong if some of our own members were offended by it. That is why we use our freedom but in a way that is loving, and ultimately glorifying God.

Our actions, all of them do matter and they do impact the people and the world around us. Yes, even our inactions can change the world around us--not for the better. Today we rejoice that God has set us free, to serve and to love and to change the world in His name. This freedom is a great responsibility, one that requires faithfulness, love, and boldness. Amen.