
The gift of freedom
Chapel in the Park United Church
July 12, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Romans 7:13-25a and Matthew 11:16-30

As you may know, I plan the themes for worship services well in advance. Sometime in March I decided that the theme today would be “freedom”. That seemed simple enough - back in March. But now that the day is here - when I reflect on the word “freedom” - I need to confess that I’m not sure I know what I’m talking about. But at least I think I know why that is the case.

The word “freedom” sounds wonderful of course. We all want freedom, right? We all probably want more freedom in life. Whether that is political freedom, economic freedom, social freedom, or personal freedom. Great. But what exactly is freedom anyway?

[image: definition below]

We can start with a standard definition, like “Freedom is the ability to do what we like, to act without interference, to be unconstrained by outside agents.” And that definition might even work in some cases. But outside of an AI-created universe, it’s hard to know how that freedom might be achieved. Here are some obvious problems with that definition.

For me, the most obvious problem with that definition is that we live in community. And so our actions affect other people. For example, if my neighbour is free to sing karaoke at full volume at 2 in the morning, that limits my freedom to get a good night’s sleep.

Another obvious problems with that definition is that our world is a large community. For many people in North America, our economic freedom sometimes comes at the expense of income inequality and the exploitation of workers. Does that really qualify as “freedom”? Does my freedom entitle me to economically enslave other people? Do other people have the freedom to economically enslave me? What sort of freedom is that?

[image: quote below]

The word freedom is also confusing because it is a different word than the word “peace”. And yet, the two concepts seem to be completely linked. As Malcom X said, “You cannot separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless [they have their] freedom.”

Which all leads me to wonder: Does that make freedom a good subject for a reflection today, or a bad one? And to answer that question, I’m going to rely on a “phone a friend”. Metaphorically. Because I want to bring Jesus into this conversation. What did Jesus say on the subject of freedom?

Jesus is actually very helpful to this conversation. For one thing, there are types of freedom that I just mentioned that Jesus did not seem to care about at all. That will simplify our discussion.

Jesus did not care about economic freedom. Jesus lived himself as an unemployed, homeless person. Jesus told rich people to give away their possessions. Jesus said that birds do not work and yet do not need to worry about anything. Jesus did not care about economic freedom.

Jesus did not care about political freedom. We are told that the Jews in Jesus day were waiting for a messiah who would liberate them from the Roman occupation of Palestine. But Jesus never spoke about the Roman occupation. Jesus never challenged the occupation. In fact, Jesus’s sharpest criticisms were aimed at uncaring religious leaders. Jesus did not care about political freedom.

[image: balloon]

Jesus did care about freedom. But freedom in the sense of personal freedom, spiritual freedom. For example, as we read earlier from Matthew, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” That is a message about personal freedom. Spiritual freedom. Not the promise of wealth and economic freedom. Not an incitement to fight for political freedom. Personal freedom.

So if we restrict our conversation today to personal freedom, perhaps we can get

somewhere. However, even personal freedom is not so simple. Which is why I included the reading from Romans today. Because the words from St. Paul in the book of Romans are a sharp contrast to the words from the Gospel of Matthew.

We have Jesus saying “my yoke is easy. Come and find rest.” And we have St. Paul, in Romans, who admits that he finds life - and the choices he has to make - very hard to deal with. The words from Jesus are encouraging, engaging, comforting. St. Paul’s words are ... discouraging, disempowering ... perhaps downright scary. St. Paul’s words also perhaps resonate with us a bit too much for our own comfort - “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” How close to home are those words for each of us - at least some of the time. Jesus speaks about peace and freedom. But St. Paul seem to be tortured by demons in his own life. St. Paul does not appear to be living with peace.

What did Jesus know that St. Paul seems to have missed?

We should start by remembering that Paul was a Pharisee before he joined the Jesus movement. And the Pharisees were big on pushing the “rule” side of religion. Or, at least telling other people to follow the rules. For example, in Matthew 23 we have, “Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practise what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.’”

And St. Paul indeed speaks as if he is suffering under a heavy burden. At the time that Paul wrote Romans, his understanding of his own faith was evolving from the “rule-based” mentality he got from the Pharisees into something new that the Jesus movement was still in the process of becoming.

So what did Jesus actually offer? What did Jesus offer that went beyond a rules-based approach to life and faith?

[image: learning a language]

I want to share an analogy with you. Because this tension between how St. Paul and Jesus viewed faith is a bit like how we learn a language. One way to learn a language

is to learn the rules. The grammar, the vocabulary, the mechanics of the language. And that is important, of course. But you could learn 100% of the rules of a language and still be completely incapable of holding a conversation. The other part of learning a language is fluency. Where we have internalized enough of the rules that we stop needing to try to follow the rules. Instead, we read the situation. We read the room. And we engage with another person. We do not just know the proper way to conjugate the verbs.

That's the difference between St. Paul and Jesus in one analogy. Paul is still working the grammar - checking what's permitted, what's forbidden, what exceptions are allowed. Whereas, Jesus is fluent. Jesus looks at a woman caught in adultery, a leper, a tax collector up a tree, and he doesn't run this words through the grammar-checker first. Jesus just speaks from the heart. And what comes out is always love, because love is the language that Jesus speaks fluently.

And here's where it might get uncomfortable for us. Most of the time, we like rules. Rules are safer. Rules tell us exactly how far we have to go. Rules let us stop helping because we've "done our duty". Following rules does not require any vulnerability.

Fluency asks more of us. Fluency asks us to actually be open to the person in front of us, to respond to them as a person. Fluency is an exercise in vulnerability. But fluency is the only thing that is ever going to produce real communication.

[image: balloon]

Let's leave the analogy of language and return to the language of faith. In short, St. Paul cared about religious rules. Jesus cared about individual people. St. Paul was self-tormented. And Jesus offers life, healing, peace, freedom. St. Paul was calculating his faith. Jesus was living his faith. The faith that Jesus shared leads to freedom. And freedom was never just a rule that we can follow. Freedom is a relationship we can only choose to enter into.

This is one reason why we are having our 3 week "Healing Circles for Forgiveness" program starting next week. Because sometimes we get stuck in the rules and forget about relationships. We have all learned some pretty unhelpful rules around forgiveness.

[image: list below]

- We cannot forgive until the other person apologizes.
- We have a duty to withhold forgiveness until ...
- We have the right to remain angry.
- Forgiving means forgetting.

These rules can contribute to making our lives miserable - just like for St. Paul who was very good at torturing himself.. But Jesus offers freedom and peace through relationships. Including having a good, loving, relationship with yourself.

If you feel like you've been withholding forgiveness for a long time please come to one of our forgiveness groups. Perhaps the person who you need to forgive is yourself. Come and find the freedom you deserve.

[image: quote below]

When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others.” ... Peace Pilgrim.

Do you think we ourselves have fully embraced the type of freedom that Jesus was talking about? Or do we struggle just like Paul does with the tension between feeling the freedom of the spirit and our own internally-felt need to create and follow rules?

We can easily get locked into patterns that prevent us from finding our own freedom. Because we sometimes only want freedom on our own terms.

[image: quote from Richard Rohr]

As Richard Rohr said, “How odd it is that God’s salvation is so seldom recognized ... Oh yes, we want help, we want solace, we want magic, but I am not sure we recognize or even want the scary freedom that God calls salvation.

Jesus offers us freedom. But - what does freedom look like?

We all have our own idea of what freedom looks like. And that’s great. Marjorie and I have done a lot of camping. Usually in Provincial Parks. And I am always amazed by how different people create their own “safe space” while camping. Camping is an expression of freedom - being away from it all. But people camp in very different ways.

[image: camping maximalistic]

Some people’s idea of freedom is to have a massive RV that contains more items

than I probably have in my own home. On our last camping trip I was struck by how many people had strung lights all around their camp site - powered by generators - turning their campsite into an area saturated in both light and sound.

[image: camping minimalistic]

Other people - like Marjorie and I - are more minimalist. They try to have as little physical presence as possible when camping. Perhaps only a small pup tent that emerges from some impossible space on a motorcycle. Leaving great emotional space in the campsite.

And I'm not saying that one approach is right and one is wrong. I just never cease to be amazed at what people find comfortable, safe, and liberating. Freedom means many different things to different people. Freedom is very personal.

I think that Jesus comes closest to an understanding of freedom in the Sermon on the Mount. In that long sermon, Jesus says a lot of things. But he emphasizes two points that are all about our own personal freedom. In one place Jesus tells us to not worry, and right after that, to not judge other people. Perhaps that's really a single idea. Because judging others usually leads us to worry about all kinds of things. The freedom that Jesus speaks of is a personal freedom to not get drawn into judging and therefore worrying and becoming afraid. Perhaps we tend to read over that text too quickly. But our own freedom comes in part from letting go of our own expectations and living into our actual reality. Rather than trying to hang on to an image of a reality that does not exist. Personal freedom is not about being free from control, but rather, as Dostoevsky said,

[image: quote below]

“Freedom is an opportunity to control yourself”.

And of course, since we don't live alone, our own personal freedom is connected to the freedoms of those around us.

[image: quote below]

Nelson Mandela said, “to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Freedom is not about being free to serve ourselves, but about creating opportunities to love and serve one another - including ourselves. And once again we get

back to the wisdom of Jesus, who said that the most important commandment was in fact three commandments: love God, love others, love yourself. We are all called to love and serve others - and that is precisely where we will find our own freedom.

One image we are given in Matthew is to be yoked with Jesus. As if we are working some land ... with Jesus by our side. Let's extend that idea by imagining that you - and Jesus - are pulling a plough.

What furrows have you been plowing in your own life? Have they led you to find freedom? If not, consider what furrows Jesus would have you plow. Where is Jesus leading you? Where do you feel the tug to explore a new path with openness that leads to discovery and new relationships? Perhaps the tug you feel is from God. Respond to the tug of God, and find freedom.

[image: quote below]

I want to give the last words to Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. These words are an aspiration we can all work towards.

“Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty we are free at last”

Amen.