
Freedom Scattered, Smothered, and Covered

A sermon by the Rev. Canon David Boyd
The Third Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 8, Year C

Allow me to set the stage. The summer after high school graduation, I put my Westminster education to work as a Waffle House waiter, hawking waffles and slinging hashbrowns. One quirk of working at Waffle House is that every employee, from cook to corporate, is required to pull a shift on every major holiday: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, and even the Fourth of July.

And so I found myself working a double shift on America's birthday at "America's Place". The Fourth was a busy day at my Waffle House, the one on Roswell Road, next to Johnny's Hideaway. You may know that every runner in the Peachtree Road Race gets a coupon for a free post-race waffle at Waffle House, and it felt like every runner came to claim it at my store!

The morning was slammed but it felt like a big party. Red, white, and blue bunting hung in the windows. Tired runners dripped syrup on their new Road Race t-shirts. Joining the festivities, I was wearing an Uncle Sam top hat and fake beard. "I want you to eat at Waffle House!"

Then my second shift rolled around - 2pm to 9pm. My morning shift coworkers clocked out, leaving me with my favorite cook, Roger, and my usual afternoon coworker, Corbin.

Now Corbin already lacked much of a work ethic, but being cooped up in a Waffle House on the 4th of July while his friends were back at the apartment slamming Star-Spangled Budweisers and blowing up fireworks... that was just a bridge too far.

After about an hour of serving up free waffles to the stragglers still trickling in, Corbin had had enough.

"That's it, I'm out!" he said, throwing off his apron and walking out the front door. Lighting up a cigarette as he crossed the parking lot, he turned back and shouted:

"Freedom!!"

And just like that, he was gone, walking down the road chanting "U-S-A!", off into the sunset of self-determination. I remember turning to Roger: "Did he just quit?" Roger, with 25 years on the grill, just shook his head and said, "He'll be back."

And he was! The following week, Corbin was back on the schedule. Apparently, freedom doesn't pay the bills.

Did I want to follow Corbin out the door? Maybe a little. I certainly would have rather been barbecuing with my family than refilling sweet teas and scrubbing public bathrooms. If I'm being honest with myself, there is a part of me that wishes I could go through life as "free" as Corbin.

For the honest sinners among us, freedom means getting what we want, when we want it. It means no obligations. No limits. No tyrants telling us what we can and cannot do.

That definition of freedom develops early in life. For example, when I was little, my mother had a strict rule: cereals had to have 12 grams of sugar per serving or less to be worthy of the breakfast table. Under such tyranny, freedom for me looked like chocolate cake for breakfast, though I would certainly settle for waffles! From my knee-high perspective, freedom looked like no chores, no bedtime, no responsibilities.

Sure, somewhere along the way, we grow up. We learn about sugar crashes and messy rooms. We learn about physical limitations and consequences to our actions. We learn that reality has hard edges and a cool demeanor. And yet, our operative definition of freedom stays the same: freedom is self-sovereignty. To be free is to be fiercely independent, totally unaccountable, and firmly in control. No confines, no consequences, no contrary voices. This definition of freedom offers insulation from a cold cosmos and insurance against disappointment and pain; it's just that the premium is total isolation from God and neighbor.

We know what kind of life grows out of trying to get your own way all the time; in his letter to the Galatians, Paul lists off all kinds of naughty behaviors and dispositions, calling them "works of the flesh." If we can get past the scandalous language of fornication, sorcery, and drunkenness, what Paul offers us is a catalog of what we do when we feel afraid, alone, and desperate to save ourselves. Ravenous for intimacy, we settle for loveless, cheap sex. Hungry for Divine presence, we turn to trinket gods and hocus pocus. Starved for community, we rely on liquid courage and the comfort of cliques. Before we know it, we are once again in bondage to bad habits, painful addictions, and hard consequences.

This is not freedom! Paul is clear: For freedom Christ has set us free! Jesus has broken our chains and liberated us from the tyranny of sin and death, opening the way to being fully alive! In Christ, there is no escape from entanglement; baptized into Christ, we belong to Christ and His cosmic family. When we are freed from sin and death, we are freed for relationship, for love, for joy, for a life that's actually worth living. As Paul writes, you are called to freedom, so that through love you may become servants to one another.

That may sound like a contradiction - *freedom* and *servanthood* in the same sentence. But Paul knows: Real freedom isn't the absence of constraint. It's the presence of Christian commitment.

Again and again Paul reminds us: we weren't set free to drift aimlessly. We were set free to abide in Christ and in one another through the power of the Spirit. Christ's is a freedom that bears the slow-growing fruit of a life rooted in grace. And it is a freedom that sets other people free, welcoming them into a new way of living. Paul calls this new kind of freedom "life in the Spirit," a life marked by affection for others and exuberance about life, by serenity and compassion, perseverance and temperance, and a core conviction that holiness permeates all things and all people. Paul wants us to picture what happens when your life is rooted in something deeper than self-interest.

Take marriage as an example. From an outside view, the bonds of matrimony might look like limitation. You bind yourself to one person. You make vows. You make sacrifices. But ask anyone who's lived deeply into the confines of a healthy, loving marriage, and they'll tell you: It's that very commitment that creates the space to love fully, to trust deeply, to grow freely. The promise creates the possibility. The boundary gives shape to the beauty.

Ask someone in recovery about the peace found in the confines of sobriety. Or a new mother or father about learning the art of patience in the confines of parenthood. True freedom grows when you stop chasing control and start walking in trust. Then we will find a love that doesn't manipulate. Joy that doesn't depend on the outcome. Peace that holds steady even when everything else is shaking. Patience. Kindness. Self-control. This is the life we were set free *for*.

And once you've tasted true freedom - once you've experienced even a glimpse of the real thing - you start to realize just how cheap and shallow the counterfeits were. After you've had Waffle House, there is no Huddle House. There is no Denny's. Once you've had the real thing, why settle for the imitation? The old life of self-salvation and self-satisfaction simply cannot compare to a life guided by the Spirit.

What does true freedom look like for you?

What would it mean to live a life that isn't ruled by fear?

What would change if you didn't have to prove anything? What would change if your days weren't shaped by scarcity or scarred by shame?

Would your pace slow down? Would your priorities shift? Would your relationships deepen?

Would you rest more? Forgive more? Speak more gently to yourself?

Where are you still trying to save yourself? What would it take to let go?

This Friday, I will catch a glimpse of true freedom. Standing on the sidewalk along Peachtree, I will witness a grand parade of thousands, maybe 50 thousand runners and walkers, people of every color, every creed, every language, every ability. A chaotic mass of bodies in motion, the celebration of sweat and determination that is the Peachtree Road Race. And over all of it will be God's blessing, holy water for holy people.

Blessed are you, runners and walkers and stragglers.

Blessed are you, cheerleaders along the course.

Blessed are you, who are hard at work on the Fourth of July.

Blessed are you, Corbin, lounging around the pool.

I will be celebrating freedom on Friday, though perhaps not independence. I will celebrate that I have been freed: freed to live life to the fullest, freed to seek beauty, freed to bless and be blessed.

Amen.