

# Freedom Exercised in Love

Proper 14 b  
Eph.4:25-5:2

The Rev. Thomas L. Weitzel  
Holy Cross Lutheran Church, Spring Hill, FL  
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All the pastors and churches of the Florida-Bahamas Synod received a communication this week from Bishop Pedro Suarez regarding the rising Covid wave currently plaguing us here in Florida. Not surprisingly, he encourages all the churches to “resume protective processes” that would include many of the things that we have returned to here at Holy Cross, like mask-wearing, social distancing, hand-sanitizing, keeping communion safe with distribution of only the bread, and so forth. As I said, it’s not surprising that our spiritual leader would encourage us to be safe in such ways.

But he goes on to explicitly state something that I’ve been thinking a lot about this summer during my time off as I have watched the news and the rise in the Covid numbers in our state, and it’s something that I want to address directly today. Here is what the bishop says:

“A foundational principle of our faith is to care for one another, and the best way to do that during this time is to wear your mask and get the vaccine, if eligible. Encourage others with respect, to be vaccinated. Wearing a mask is a sign of caring for our neighbors as well as for ourselves. Loving our neighbors as ourselves is a crucial part of our belief as Christians.”

Then he ends his letter with this: “Let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul to the Philippians, ‘Let each of you look not only to your interest, but also to the interest of others.’ (Philippians 2:4)”

Caring for one another is a foundational principle of our faith, he says. Look not only to your interest, but also to the interest of others, he says, and quotes scripture.

Do you realize how radically different that posture is from the continuous noise and blather about “me and my rights” that has been dominating the public discourse ever since this pandemic began? “It’s all about me and my rights – my right to choose for me and my own – my right not to have anyone, and particularly not a government agency, force things on me that I don’t want to do. It’s all about me – me and mine – and neither you nor anyone else can make me do anything I don’t want to do!”

That’s pretty much the mantra, isn’t it?

So given the bishop’s letter and his emphasis on caring for one another as a “foundational principle of our faith,” here’s my question: Is there a place in the Church of Jesus Christ for all this talk of me and my rights? That’s what I’ve been thinking about for some weeks now. Let’s explore the scriptures and see what we find on this subject, starting with Genesis 1.

In the beginning, there was God (v.1). And God created all that there is (vv.3-25). And then, as the culmination of all his creating activity, God created humanity (v.26). “In

the image of God he created them” (v.27). Out of love, God created them (Ps.8:3-5). As God was loving, so he created humanity to be loving – of one another and of the creation that God had made (Gen.1:28-30).

But sin and self-absorption came into the picture with the temptation in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3. God had commanded the man and the woman not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen.2:17). But they had been tempted and ate from it anyway (Gen.3:6).

“Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked,” it says in verse 7. And not just naked, but self-focused and self-concerned – as opposed to being absorbed in the love of God and the love of one another and all of creation. Self-focused and APART from God, when they had been created by God in his image so that they would be loving and connected to God.

That’s the nature of sin. Sin separates. Love unites – unites us to God and to one another, but sin separates. That’s the witness of scripture over and over again. Starting with the first book of the Bible and running straight through to the last. That’s the witness of life too. Sin separates, while love unites.

And yet after that first sin of self-absorption in the Garden of Eden, God did not abandon those he created (Gen.3:21), nor did he stop calling them back to him and back to loving. God loves us with an everlasting love, the Bible tells us (Jer.31:3). And his constant call is back to loving him and loving one another.

In the book of Exodus, when God brings the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to freedom under his love and rule, he takes them to Mt. Sinai and gives them the law. And what was the law’s purpose? To show the people how to BE the people of God. How to BE loving of God and loving of one another (Ex.20:1f).

In other words, God tells the Israelites, “Your freedom must be framed in terms of loving me and loving one another.” Only then will they truly be God’s people.

Throughout the Old Testament narrative, we see God again and again calling his people back to loving him and loving one another. Indeed, when God intercedes and sends a prophet, it is because the people of God have generally NOT been loving of one another. And when you are NOT loving one another, then you clearly are NOT listening to God OR being loving of God (2 Kg.17:9-13; Am.5:4-14; Is.55:6-7; Joel 2:13) That too is the witness of scripture.

Is it any different in the New Testament? Not at all. The people of God are still called to love God and love neighbor. Says Jesus quite clearly, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt.22:37-38).

Take note how he says it here. It isn’t JUST love your neighbor, but love your neighbor “as yourself” – which Jesus quotes directly from Leviticus (19:18).

So important is this love principle, that Jesus bases his entire ministry of teaching and preaching on it. So important is this love principle, that he makes it the primary litmus test for who is a disciple and who isn’t. Says Jesus, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn.13:35). It’s just as God had said it when he gave the law, “Your freedom must be framed in terms of loving me and loving one another.”

So important is this love principle, that Jesus even goes to the cross for it. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn.3:16-17). In other words, our salvation is completely based on this principle of God’s love for us through Jesus Christ and his self-sacrifice for us.

Therefore love of God and love of neighbor have a self-sacrificial quality to it for us as well. Says St. Peter, “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt.2:5). Says St John, “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (1 Jn.3.16). Says St. Paul in our second lesson for today, “Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph.5:1-2).

So how do we balance such love against the freedoms given to us through the gospel and in the land in which we live? Paul takes up that topic in 1 Corinthians 10 very succinctly. “‘All things are lawful’, but not all things are beneficial. ‘All things are lawful’, but not all things build up. Do not seek your own advantage, but that of others.... So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved” (vv.23-24,31-34).

The focus here is the other, not self. The focus is “building up ... so that [others] may be saved.” The focus is personal sacrifice for the sake of others. The focus for the people of God is being loving as God is loving.

You will not find anything in the Bible about personal rights. It is a foreign concept, as far as the scriptures are concerned. Why? Because the people of God are called into community around a loving God who created us to be loving as he is loving.

Do not forget how it is that Jesus taught us to pray. He taught us, saying, “Our Father, who art in heaven.... Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of others.” Not MY Father. Not MY daily bread. Not MY sins. When pray, we stand with ALL who are called to live in the community of the loving God.

We do not pray alone. We do not live alone. We do not love alone. We live in community under the loving God. Therefore our choices can never be entirely individual. Our choices are related to how they impact others. You will find that again and again throughout scripture. So the question must always be asked, is what I am choosing being loving of others and helping to build up those around us?

Be the Christian that you are called to be. Love God and love one another as you would love yourself.