

Called to Freedom

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25 (Preached at Footscray Baptist Church June 26th, 2022 by Cheryl Williams)

Paul says we are called to freedom, freedom to love. We sing –freedom is coming or where the spirit is there is freedom or take freedom’s clothing or travelling the road to freedom.

So, what is freedom?

What is non freedom?

What binds, holds people captive, what imprisons?

After an Arts degree, where I studied criminal law, judicial reasoning and criminology I had some pretty strong views on prisons and their efficacy. As recidivism rates hovered around 80%, I was pretty sure they didn’t work. During my work for 10 years at the Department of Justice analyzing higher court crime sentencing statistics I was even more certain they didn’t work. I began volunteering with young offenders and they taught me a thing or two about freedom – prison bars were not the main thing that held them captive – rather it was dysfunctional families, lack of opportunity, little schooling, drugs and alcohol and mixing in the wrong crowd that imprisoned them. Sometimes they found the freedom to be themselves when they were given boundaries – boundaries that reminded them that somebody loved them enough to keep them safe and to help them be what they could be.

My friend Zohreh , whom some of you have met here, won the Directors Award at the Religious Art Prize at the Gallery on Chapel a number of years ago and on the screen is part of one of her works. Zohreh is an asylum seeker from Iran, in fact her artwork is one of the reasons she had to flee Iran. You can see more of it in my office, the picture on the wall is one of hers.



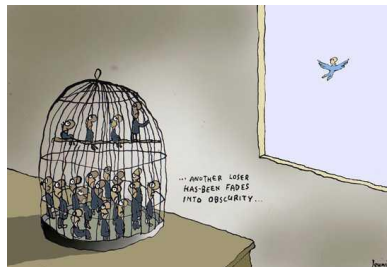
When I first saw this first image, I was moved to tears. Is it an eye seeking freedom or is it an eye looking at me and asking why my country builds a fence around itself to keep others out, or am I looking out toward freedom? What is the significance of the hole in the fence or wire? Is that the hope? Maybe one or the other can escape the fence or enter behind the fence? Maybe one or both of us might find our way to freedom?

In the second image which I think is a companion piece to the first, I am forced to think about who is free? Is the one making a perilous and dangerous journey seeking freedom, actually the one who is free? Can the one who lives behind the fence designed

to keep them out every really be free? And again, we see a hole if the fence, do we see a sign of hope?



A number of years ago, one of my colleagues was telling me about her English teacher in Romania who had recently died, she spoke of his gentleness and the ways in which he lived out his faith. She told me how he and his family would regularly go to the market and buy the finches that were in cages. They would then take the finches out to the countryside and let them go free. This image is one of Michael Leunig's.



Have you ever read Nelson Mandela's book – The Long Walk to Freedom? What a long walk it was for him, some 27 years incarcerated on an island prison. Two things remain with me from reading that work:

1. When the captor frees the one they hold captive, they too find freedom
2. To be truly free one must forgive those who have bound them.

What does freedom mean to us and our community after a couple of years of lockdown? What does freedom mean to those held captive by their economic, family and individual circumstances?

Freedom as I learnt very early on in my studies always comes with responsibility. For Paul and Jesus that responsibility is called love. The gifts of the Spirit that Paul lists for the faithful in Galatia and in Footscray are all about love and they all enable others to experience the freedom to be all they can be, to be their true selves.

So, as you feed the homeless person a meal and listen to their stories and take an interest in who they are – there is freedom.

When you listen and share the tears of a war veteran as he weeps into his next drink – there is freedom,

When you hold the hand of an older woman remembering better times, who is starting to forget – there is freedom.

When you begin a conversation with one who walks the streets looking for company – there is freedom.

When you teach English and learn a few words from their language with an asylum seeker – there is freedom.

When you gently encourage a younger person to have confidence in their ideas and thoughts – there is freedom.

When you hold the hand of someone troubled by addiction of any kinds – there is freedom.

When you help dismantle the boxes that people have been put in – there is freedom.

When you show a child a different experience of childhood instead of the neglect and abuse, they have been shown by someone who is supposed to love them – there is freedom.

When you help someone stand up against the bully – there is freedom.

When the young offender confides in you as you drive him to his accommodation having been released from a very long sentence, that he intends to change his name so he can train as a fire fighter and give back to the community, – there is freedom.

When you sit in a café with a middle-aged woman for an hour or so, who simply wants to escape her ‘tangled mind’ younger onset dementia has left her with, by being ‘normal’ – there is freedom.

Today at lunch when you sit beside someone you don’t really know and find out about what makes them tick - there is freedom.

Will you join hands and begin the long walk to freedom? Will you gently use the gifts God has given you to enable others to be truly themselves? Will you answer the call to freedom that leads to dignity, to peace and to joy? This is the freedom God calls us to.

Where there is love, there is freedom. Where the Spirit is there is freedom. Amen.