

Many of you know that I went to Russia right after I graduated from college on mission work. It was right after the fall of communism. Boris Yeltsin was president. We had a guide for a portion of our time in Moscow, his name was Dima. He had actually been in the army and was present on the day that Yeltsin climbed up on that tank and stared down the attempted coup against Gorbachev.

Thinking back on it, I am a bit surprised how candid everyone was in talking to our small group of American students. The country was in chaos and nobody seemed concerned about hiding it in the least.

As a bus took us out to the village of Istra where we would spend a few weeks in an orphanage for deaf children, we passed shanty-towns that would be considered uninhabitable by most of us – and off across the flat horizon, one could see mansions being built – big, square homes that stood in abject opposition to the poverty that laced the landscape. It was clear the economy was in shambles and folks were struggling, and so I was intrigued by these new construction projects. I asked Dima about them. “Oh, those belong to the mafia.”

He just laid it out there, matter of factly, “Oh, yes, the mafia.”

It was just so openly and plainly stated.

I found out later on that while we were in Istra, our passports were confiscated. I didn’t realize it at the time, thankfully, but when they were allegedly checking our visas, they wouldn’t return our passports to the minister who was our organizer. The local authorities held them for a couple of days. “How did you get them back,” I asked after I had my passport safely back in my hand. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know

the answer to,” my friend replied. Later, when we were planning to give a gift to the orphanage, our organizer informed us that this was no longer possible – the traveling money had been used. “How, why,” we asked? “You have your passports, don’t you,” came the reply.

It was the closest thing I’ve ever experienced to the “wild west.”

All law and order seemed absent.

It is interesting that in the early days of the church there was almost a wild-west mentality as well, or so it must have seemed to those whose religious faith had been well ordered.

With the influx of the gentiles into the faith, there was a whole wash of people coming into the church who had no prior background, no prior knowledge of what faith practice looked like.

The Jewish Christians had a strong background, but the Christians who came out of a pagan background had no frame of reference for what a Christian life might look like.

And so Paul seemed frequently to be correcting folks in his letters to the churches that he founded.

And what is so interesting about Paul’s admonitions is how frequently they seem to be based, not on deep theology, but on common sense. Here’s an example. You’ve heard about how Paul tells women to cover their heads in first Corinthians? Corinth was a city that was built around its prostitution. The prostitutes could easily be identified because they let their hair down in a culture where women didn’t let their hair down. So, Paul’s common sense advice to the women of Corinth: if you don’t want to be mistaken for a hooker, cover up your head.

He did a similar number on the men in Rome who were visiting adolescent male prostitutes, “Now, gentlemen, think this through... the Romans may not care, but do you really think Jesus approves of your using people in this way?”

Common sense seems to pervade Paul’s advice.

So a fair amount of Paul’s advice was remarkably candid, open, specific, and to the point addressing the issues that came up. Paul’s advice was frequently contextual, and from time to time, differed depending on the church situation. Paul drew the line in the wild-west that was the religious frontier in the years that the church was learning to define itself in light of Jesus Christ.

Paul was always encouraging Christians to defy the culture in order to follow Christ.

In fact, I am so sure of this that I’m going to go out on a bit of a theological limb to defend Paul today. While Paul’s writings have so often been used wrongly to condemn homosexuals, in light of his common sense approach to the matters of faith that he demonstrates over and over again, I feel sure that if Paul were preaching today he would have been on the steps of the Supreme Court this week saying, in a commitment-averse world, who *wouldn’t* want to encourage commitment in relationships!?

In fact, while Paul’s writings have been misunderstood to be stringently anti-people, here in this passage of Galatians he so clearly advocates that we ought not place obstacles in the way of people seeking to live their faith in Jesus Christ.

Indeed, in the more juicy portion of the scripture that the lectionary omitted today, we learn that a faction within the churches associated with Galatia, a rather vague geography, by the way, sought to place an unnecessary restriction on to the new believers.

Because the Jewish practice of the covenant from time almost immemorial had been to circumcise infant boys on the eighth day, a group within the church had begun to teach that all adult male converts must themselves be circumcised.

Once more Paul asks, “To what end?” “Why do you think this is necessary?”

Actually, that’s not quite the way he puts it... it goes a little more like this:

“Just what exactly has gotten into you people??? Do you really think that God is in the business of throwing up boundaries to people’s desire to commit to Jesus Christ? Who has been teaching you this, because I *know* you didn’t learn that from me.”

He’s pretty angry in this letter. In the part that we left out, he wraps it all up saying, “If you’re so keen on cutting on people, why don’t you just keep cutting on yourselves.”

That’s the part we left out. That’s the part that leads into this resounding affirmation of the freedom to which Christ has called us.

It’s not wild-west freedom, it’s freedom for God’s people to be who God made them to be.

It’s a bit amazing to me the almost tribal need that humans have to define ourselves in groups. That’s what’s going on in Galatia... Christians have to look like this: _____.

You can insert whatever you want in that blank, and it will be just as irrelevant today as it was then.

Indeed, Paul reminds us the whole law is summed up in the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But somehow, the temptation seems to remain to create super-standards beyond mere baptism. Despite Jesus’ simple commandment to love our neighbors and to follow him, there seems to be that temptation.

The disciples have their own wild-west moment of wanting to take the law into their own hands as well. As Jesus is working his way to Jerusalem – which in Luke is a fatal destination – he and the disciples encounter a Samaritan village that fails to recognize Jesus and to follow him and the disciples rather glibly, it seems, present Jesus with an option: “shall we call down fire on them?”

I mean, really, that’s a bit extreme, don’t you think?

Jesus rebuked them for it. Just as Paul rebuked the Galatian Christians for seeking to impose onerous requirements on new converts, he drew his inspiration from Jesus who rejected such measures.

Indeed, as Jesus goes on, he seems to be having a moment of clarity on what it means to be called, what it means to follow.

In turn, people approach Jesus with their excuses: let me go bury my parents. (They were dead.) “No,” Jesus says.

“Let me go and say goodbye,” another asks.

“No,” says Jesus.

And I want to be very clear here, this is not a moment of unkindness... it’s a moment of clarity. Jesus is saying the same thing here in Luke that Paul will later repeat and it’s this: “get your eye on the ball.”

There are going to be plenty enough distractions to keep you from following Jesus.

Those distractions may take the form of well-intentioned other commitments, such as those proposed by Jesus’ would-be followers. They’re still distractions.

The distractions may appear a bit more worldly, like those Paul colorfully fences out, “Fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger,

quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

That’s not an ultimatum; that’s an observation. God doesn’t stop loving us when we do bad things, but bad things keep us from loving God and following Jesus.

“For freedom, Christ has set us free.”

It’s not wild-west freedom; it’s Christian freedom. It’s not freedom as license to do whatever, whenever and however, we wish, it’s freedom to live the lives that God created us to live... lives marked by the claim of Jesus Christ upon us.

It is a big thing to be claimed by Jesus Christ – something’s different when we’re claimed by Jesus Christ – and that is the point that Jesus is making – that Paul is making. It’s not the external appearance that circumcision makes on the body that is important, Paul says, it’s what’s going on inside – and perhaps as importantly, what the internal change makes happen on the outside.

You see, the goal here isn’t intellectual assent to being saved by Jesus. That’s why circumcision is singularly unimportant to Paul. That’s why Jesus waves away those who want to handle a few business matters before getting down to the matter of following Jesus, the goal is a whole-life occupation.

You remember the occupy movements that occurred a while back? You know, “Occupy Wall Street,” “Occupy Atlanta,” and all the others?

Whatever your opinion of the motives and the methods of the protestors, I think it is probably fairly self-evident that it was a visually vivid approach. You remember what it

looked like. You remember what it sounded like. And you remember it because it was so, well, occupying.

That's the sort of following that Jesus is looking for – not the sort that looks for ways to get out of it, put it off, find some way to tribalize it and make it mine, but the sort of following that says, “right now, right here, all of you, make me yours” sort of following.

Paul naturally has some opinions about how to achieve that sort of following: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.”

That's the sort of freedom we're called to live into.

I want to tell you about a man named Paul Gruninger. You've probably never heard of him, there's no reason why you should have, but you need to know who he was. He was a Swiss teacher, who, in order to secure a better living for himself and his wife Alice, joined the police force in his town in the thirties. Tom Long recounts his story thus:

“In April 1939, Gruninger found his way to work blocked by a uniformed office who told him, ‘Sir you no longer have the right to enter these premises.’ An investigation revealed that Gruninger was secretly altering the documents of Jews fleeing Austria for the safety of Switzerland. ‘Non-Aryan’ refugees were not allowed to cross the border after August 19, 1938, but all it took was a few strokes of Gruninger's pen to predate a passport and perhaps save a life, a small action but one of great personal risk. Gruninger was dismissed from his position, ordered to turn in his uniform and subjected to criminal charges. The authorities spread false rumors that Gruninger had demanded sexual favors

from those he aided. Disgraced as a law-breaker and shunned by his neighbors, Gruninger peddled raincoats and animal feed until he died in poverty in 1972.”¹

The interesting thing about the freedom that Jesus offers is that it is not freedom *from* as it is freedom *for*... For Freedom Christ has set us free – so that we may be whom God has made us to be – not something else, not someone else’s image of who we ought to be, not some tribal grouping that says some are in and some are out – for *freedom* Christ has set us free.

Tom concludes his article about Paul Gruninger with these words:

“Theologian Arthur McGill said it is of little use to urge people to be brave or selfless. ‘Whether people serve themselves or serve others,’ he said, ‘is not in their power to choose. This is decided wholly in terms of the world in which they think they live. In New Testament terms, they live or die according to the king that holds them and the kingdom to which they belong...

Paul and Alice are buried together near St. Gallen. Seventy years later a plaque was placed at the foot of Paul’s grave. It reads, ‘Paul Gruninger saved hundreds of refugees in 1938/39.’ At his funeral, a choir sang, ‘Nearer My God to Thee,’ and a rabbi read from the Talmud: ‘He who saves a single life, saves the entire world.’”²

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

¹ Thomas G. Long. *Small Acts of Courage* in The Christian Century. May 2, 2012.

² Ibid.