Ok, we’re continuing our series on Lutheran theology. And today we are looking at what we mean by freedom. We’ve been spending a little time in Paul’s letter to the Galatians and his most famous line from the book is probably Galatians 5:1. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”

Freedom has to be one of the most interesting words and concepts that we could possibly have. World wide, I freedom is probably the most important value that we find. It’s our ultimate concern I think. All people want freedom. Just for fun one afternoon I spent some time listening to most of the world’s national anthems on YouTube. And just about all of them, are celebrations of freedom. The world is galvanized right now, I’ve never experienced such human solidarity as I have with this Ukraine war. It’s brought people together in this unity that is palpable. There is sense of being united against the forces of domination represented by Putin and the Russians. Live free or die. What word has been more important in the history of the world, than the word freedom? It’s what our flag stands for.

But what do we mean by it? In one sense of course it’s obvious. If you were a slave on a cotton plantation, freedom is obvious. For the Ukrainian people, freedom is obvious. It’s the freedom from domination, from being controlled by a power that forces you, dictates to you, demands obedience. A power that rules by threat and intimidation, and fear of punishment. Isn’t that what freedom usually means? Yeah, freedom is usually understood as freedom from these things. It’s a form of detachment. It’s cutting the apron strings, breaking the chains that bind you. Walking out of jail. It’s freedom from school if you’re a kid.

Freedom has different flavors, different feelings, different realities that it points to. Sometimes, It’s like a bird being set free from the cage, or a balloon being cut after a graveside service. It’s like your under the water and you can’t breath and you finally reach the surface and it’s just, Ah, I can breath free. It’s the first day of spring. If you been depressed for a long time and one day you actually feel good, it’s like it’s hard to describe that kind of freedom. Freedom from guilt, or fear, or what people think of you. Yeah, it’s like coming up for air.

But freedom has other flavors and feelings as well. Here in this country, the freedom we really love it seems has taken on a kind of boastful attitude. It feels more like belligerence. A long while back Johnny Paycheck had a country song, called “take this job and shove it”. It was basically the form of a middle finger salute to his boss. And every time I listen to that song it’s like yeah! I’m not taking this crap any more. And I think more and more that’s what freedom is coming to mean in American culture. Remember how the Ukrainian soldiers on snake island responded when that Russian ship demanded that they surrender. Yeah, the middle finger salute. And the whole world just went, Yeah! And I did too. It was awesome. And in some extreme situations this boastful attitude works pretty well. I will not be ruled. It’s right on.

But this boastful freedom, that works in extreme situations doesn’t work when it becomes the norm. But this is what has happened, and now freedom is used as an excuse to simply be awful. Now, every group out there, anti-vaxers, pro-vaxers, gun rights, civil rights, masks, critical race theory, you name it, are all justifying their ugly boastful attitudes by waving the flag and yelling about freedom. And I think this is very true, that freedom now has often become a way to look patriotic and have a cause in the name of basically being a jerk. Freedom is going very, very wrong in the land of the free. Freedom has become an excuse now for being the worst kind of person. I thought that’s what we were freed from, not for.

The reason for this is quite simple I think. We’ve only been taught freedom as freedom from. I was listening to a former Luther seminary professor talk about what freedom means in our Lutheran tradition. And he put problem today in this way. If you want to frustrate an American, ask them what their freedom is for. What’s it for? We never get there, because we’re too stuck thinking that freedom is only freedom from. You talk to any kid in this country and you ask them what freedom is and they will say without exception. I can do whatever I want. They’ve already learned it. Is that freedom? If that’s what you believe, anything that gets in your way, will be a threat to your freedom. And that’s where we are. Other groups, other people, other points of view. Anything I don’t like threatens my freedom now, and gives me the right to wave the flag and be boastful, arrogant, and rude. This freedom?

So maybe we need to brush up on freedom a little bit. And to do this I’m going to put up on the screen one of Martin Luther’s most famous phrases. This comes from a little pamphlet that he wrote called “The freedom of a Christian”. And you will see here that yes, freedom is freedom from. But then there is something else needed. Because freedom is also freedom for something.

To make the way smoother for the unlearned—for only them do I serve—I shall set down the following two propositions concerning freedom…...

“A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. Martin Luther

Ok, so theologically in our tradition then there are two parts to freedom. The first part is freedom from isn’t it? It’s that freedom that everyone understands. This is “free as bird”. I will not be ruled. By the Russians, by what people think of me. Spiritually we’ve talked in this series about a life freed from the law, this authority over you that turns life into have to’s and rules by threats, demand, and fear of punishment, demanding obedience. The law sucks the life out of life. You’re free from that. You are the Lord of all. Wow. That’s maybe even more than you expected.

But now what? I remember the day I graduated from high school. And man did we celebrate being free. Wow. We were the lords of all, we certainly were. We had this big party, and everyone got ripped and we whooped and hollered and just had a big time. We got in our cars and drove around “whoo hoo” we’re free! And we did that for a while, like all night. But pretty soon, we all just had to back home. Now what? And we need to get this next part right because if we don’t we’re going to have a real hard time with life after being set free. Because you got to get a job. And deal with everybody else. And if you just think freedom is simply freedom from, you’re going to be very frustrated with your life. Kind of like our country is today. So here comes the second part, what freedom is for.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. There you are Lord of all. You’re set free to be a servant. That what your freedom is for. Does that sound familiar? Sounds just like Jesus doesn’t it? He was Lord of all. But how did he show it? He came down and became a servant. That’s freedom. To be free is to be set free to serve, Luther says. To be a servant of all. True freedom then, is the willingness to give up your freedom for the sake of the other. And this is what we do not understand or teach, and this is why our flag waving is now so belligerent and nasty. We don’t understand freedom. To be free is to be committed to something that matters. Lutherans would say that freedom comes from serving your neighbor. In making a commitment to your community, your country, to God.

See this is the Word of God. God has made a commitment to each one of us. Jesus had it all. He was Lord of all. But he gave up his freedom to be a servant. That’s the Freedom of the Gospel. Today we have a baptism. And Paige and Lathen have made a commitment. First of all to each other. There are a lot fishies in the sea, I chose you. That’s what freedom is. See, you always give up freedom to be free. And then they and their family have made a commitment to Ava. To be this child’s parents. That’s giving up freedom. Today commitments are made to bring up a child in the faith. To be sure, the law can ruin it and turn into a have to. But it’s meant to be freedom to be able to teach and grow in the faith. You have to give up a some of your freedom to do that. But that’s what it means to be free. If you watch the ice skaters at the Olympics it’s just amazing how free they are. But they had to commit to a lot of training to be free like that. They had to give up their freedom in order to be free. All of these things are what we all would recognize as life itself. As love. Sure, we are free from. But It’s our commitments that set us free. A commitment to this world it’s people. You get that gift and you’ll be free. Because that kind of commitment is exactly what God gives to you, and what we receive in this baptism today.

So again, I hope this Lutheran theology is helpful to you in understanding what it means to be free. Yes, we are free to be Lords of all. But true freedom in this country, the freedom the flag stands for, cannot only mean freedom from each other, a freedom that justifies our ugly dispositions. It can be easily shown and easily seen today in our worship and in this baptism, that true freedom is freedom for each other. A desire to not only separate, but come together again in a commitment to this world and its people. For this is how Jesus taught us to be by his life, death, and resurrection. Lord, on this day, we lift up to you our desire to be free. Help us think about and get what that means.

Amen.