

In both the Epistle and Gospel readings for today there is a similarity about the way Paul and Jesus are doing their work. At this point both of them are moving about with a certain amount of freedom. Paul, for many years after gaining the blessings of the Church in Jerusalem, moved rather freely about the Mediterranean region establishing churches in the name of Jesus. The same can be said of Jesus' activity as reported very early in the Gospel of Mark.

In Mark, if you recall last week's Gospel reading, Jesus has just been in the synagogue demonstrating a powerful understanding, powerful knowledge and a powerful insight into the Jewish scriptures. What he taught was so amazing that when he healed a deeply disturbed man no one criticizes him for "working" on the Sabbath. Jesus and the followers leave there and go to Simon and Andrew's house. Again he "works" on the Sabbath by healing their mother who then goes right to work herself fixing dinner! Later Jesus leaves the house to go pray just before Jesus and all his followers begin a tour of the Galilean region preaching, teaching and healing.

We know both Paul's and Jesus' story though. We know that it would not be long before both of them saw such freedom greatly diminished. We know that the longer both of them served God the less freedom they had. The longer they declared God's love, grace, mercy, and being truly free from worldly concerns the more they were pursued and eventually imprisoned.

Paul spent several nights in jail cells. Paul knew the sting of the lash on his body. Paul knew full well the hate and fear of those who wanted to curtail his freedom. Jesus on the other hand only experienced all of that just once. In one brutal 24 hour period Jesus experienced the dank confines of jail cells. Jesus twice bore the withering offensive of false accusations. Jesus felt many stings; of blows of the lash, of the insults from enemies and soldiers and the spiny thorns on his brow. Jesus endured the spirit crushing walk of shame carrying his own means of death; the agony of being crucified; and, what must have been the blessed relief from all this suffering, death.

Freedom: the ability to act freely; release from captivity or slavery; a country's right to self-rule; an individual's right to act or speak freely; absence of unpleasantness; ease of movement; right to occupy space or place; frankness; liberty; autonomy;

independence. It is a word that conveys so much to us as citizens of country and faith.

And yet Paul, in his response to his beloved church in Corinth also speaks of what such freedom costs. He speaks of the obligation of faith. He talks about how the exercise of free will leads to rewards not of his own will. He uses the word commission.

Paul's words are ones of contradiction, too. He "make(s) the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel." He says, "For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all." Then he says that, "I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

Does that sound like freedom to you? Or liberty or autonomy or independence? It sounds more like schizophrenia, or paranoid delusions, or the quickest way to burn out to me! And as it was with Paul, so it is with Jesus. There are several occasions where the disciples implore Jesus to turn from the path that he seems dead set on taking – the one to Golgotha and a tomb. The path to fewer opportunities to teach and heal, the path to less freedom. Through it all Jesus continually speaks of being able to freely follow the will of his Father, our God.

Today's scripture readings give us brief glimpses of what Paul speaks of constantly in his letters and what Jesus passionately demonstrates in his life and teachings. What is that? It is all of the freedom and all of the gifts God gives freely to us. Yes, God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, free will, and love – all freely given. The freedom to think, to express ourselves, freedom from lives of animals that is so tightly controlled by instinct, freedom of conscience, freedom to learn, all given first by our God. And then, when we discover all these freedoms, we so feebly act in our humanness to protect these freedoms in our constructs of government.

All of this, all of these freedoms, all these gifts freely given; all of them are free but not one of them is cheap. Those freedoms we know as US citizens are won by struggles of both mind and body against enemies both without and within. These freedoms are ones that each generation has to struggle to appreciate and keep. Those freedoms we know as citizens of faith are ones of contradiction and sacrifice that we have to struggle with as surely as did Paul and as faithfully as did Christ.