

Either Paul likes playing the part of Captain Obvious or he knows the people in the church in Galatia are not the brightest bunch. "It is for freedom that you have been set free," he says slowly, making sure to punctuate each word. "Freedom. Freedom is why you are free."

The really smart ones in the group are wondering if Paul just likes to hear himself talk. "Umm, yeah, thanks Paul. We got it already." I mean, are wings meant for flying? Are fins meant for swimming? So is freedom meant for being free.

And yet, Paul says it not just once, but twice, saying it the second time a little differently, just in case we didn't get his point the first time. "You were called to freedom. It is for freedom that you have been set free."

I can't speak for you, but one reason I might not think Paul is talking to me this morning is because I've never thought of myself as not being free. If anything, my worldview is one in which I have always thought of myself as being free. Where does this worldview come from? From a lot of places, I suppose, and from different places for each of us. For me, it comes in part from having come of age in a white, middle class American family. My parents both worked, and worked hard, and while they may have said there were times we went without, as a child I thought of myself as being free to have most of what I wanted, and all of what I needed. Going to college and then to graduate school and seminary was deemed an opportunity, not a luxury. I remember attending 4th of July parades and thinking that freedom was waving an American flag on Main Street. It was singing *God Bless America* in church on Sunday morning. It was baseball and cheeseburgers in the backyard. It was seeing a Vietnam or Korean War Veteran and thinking, I am free because I live in America, and not in Korea or Vietnam.

"It is for freedom that you have been set free." No duh, Paul. Now would someone please turn the baseball game back on.

Another reason I've never thought of myself as not being free is because I've never been overtaken by the power of an addiction. I've never heard my own voice inside my head telling me, "Just put down the bottle, just throw away the needle," and then looked in the mirror to see myself pick up the bottle or the needle anyway.

I've never been in a relationship with someone who beat me in any way. I've never known what it's like to be told by my spouse or my parents or my closest friends, "You're worthless," and again, to know I don't have to take it, but to not be able to walk away.

Please hear me, I don't mean to suggest that the addicted and bruised could just as easily be free of their addiction and bruising, if only they would choose to be. No, no. I simply mean that it's easy to speak of freedom and of being free when you've never had to do battle half-way around the world, or just inside your own head.

"It is for freedom that you have been set free." It suddenly makes me wonder what Paul knows that I don't.

It turns out, Paul knows plenty. That when Paul says, "Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single command: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,'" Paul is thinking about the story of his Jewish ancestors, who, if you choose to believe it, are also our ancestors. Paul knows their story well. To find it we have to go back in our Bibles some 6,000 years and to book of Genesis, where Paul's great-great-great-great grandfather Jacob, along with his 12 sons, are all living in Egypt. It was all thanks to Joseph, Jacob's youngest son, who, when a great famine struck the land, brought his father and his 11 brothers to Egypt, to the one place left that had food.

Given that only a few years earlier, Joseph's brothers had sold him to a caravan of Ishmaelite peddlers on their way to Egypt—"We don't know him and we don't want him anymore," they told them—it was an extraordinarily gracious thing for Joseph to do—to now take in the ones who had put him out. It was something, perhaps, only Joseph could do, though. For neither Jacob nor any of his 11 sons are from Egypt. They are from Canaan. Their birth certificates all say Canaan. When they pass over into Egypt, their passports are all stamped with the seal of Canaan. And they look and sound like they're from Canaan. Their skin color is a bit off in Egypt. They don't speak the language, and they don't practice the national religion of Egypt. As Canaanites, Jacob's family are monotheists. They believe in one God, not many, like they do in Egypt. They are descendants of Abraham, the one to whom God said: "Out of all the nations of the earth, I choose you. I will bless you, and make your name great, so that in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Yet, in Egypt

none of that counts for anything. In Egypt, they are not in a position to bless anyone. They are hungry, afraid, and hoping someone will let them in.

What a surprise to show up as beggars at the door and find their brother Joseph opening it for them. “Joseph, how did you get here?” they ask. “And why would you open the door to us of all people?”

This is when Joseph makes what has to be one of the greatest and most counterintuitive statements of all time. It will become the Bible’s theme for all eternity. Joseph tells his brothers, “God made a way for me in this land away from home. How could I now not make a way for you?”

In his book, *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Jonathan Saks writes that the Bible’s single ethic is to encounter God in the face of a stranger. God creates difference, that we might meet God in the one-who-is-different. The test of faith is whether we can make space for that difference. Can we recognize God’s image in someone who is not in my image, whose language, faith, and ideals are different from my own?¹

Granted, it’s easier for us to embrace difference when we don’t feel threatened by it, when we don’t feel like we need to protect ourselves from it. Fast forward a few years in the story to the first chapter in the book of Exodus. Joseph and all his brothers are now dead, a whole generation we are told has come and gone, and a new king, one who does not know Joseph, has arisen in Egypt. Uh oh. “Who are all these people?” the king asks one day. “They don’t look Egyptian, they don’t talk Egyptian, they don’t worship Egyptian.” The new king, feeling threatened by the difference, takes action. To show them who’s boss, he makes a law that all Hebrew male babies should be drowned in the Nile. At the same time, he sets taskmasters over the men and women, forcing them to build cities for Egypt. Do you see what’s going on here? Using the power of the law to prey on the vulnerable and humiliate the proud, if only to gain recognition in the world. It’s taking the differences that God intends for our dignity and unity, and using them instead to degrade and divide.

¹ Saks, Jonathan (2003). *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. New York: Continuum Publishing, p. 60.

This goes on for many, many years until one day God says, Enough. And God calls Moses, one of the Hebrew babies who got away from Egypt, to go back to Egypt to stand up to the king and demand the freedom of the slaves.

We all know how this part of the story goes, so let me rush on to my conclusion. The people are set free. They travel beyond Egypt and eventually arrive in a new land, where there is no king and no law, but still lots of different people. Shouldn't be a problem, though, right? After all, we're not in Egypt anymore. But no sooner have they met the new neighbors and they begin to worry. What if there's not enough land to go around? What if there's not enough food on the land? Who will have to go without? Not us. We've been there, done that. What if their religious practices start to get in the way of ours? What if they turn out to be mean and violent towards us? What if, what if, what if... "Ah, I know what we should do," they say. "We should get ourselves a king and set up some laws." And just like that history repeats itself. The oppressed become the oppressing, the victim becomes the perpetrator, the slave becomes the master.

This is not a new story. Neither is it an old story. It is our story. It is the Jew in East Providence who walked into their synagogue to worship yesterday, even though a new chapter of the KKK has opened up in their neighborhood. But it is also the Muslim mosque I read about in California who shares their holy space with a Christian church whose building burned to the ground this past year.

It is the migrant child who sits in a cage this morning in Texas because their parents had to flee their home in Guatemala for the safety of life in America. But it also the Hindu and the atheist who are standing together at the border this morning handing out water and holding up signs announcing freedom.

We need laws, and we need borders, but I tell you, if the story we have heard this morning rings true at all it is because it's an old story that has never been changed—and is never going to be changed—by borders and walls. *It is for freedom that you have been set free.*

I'll leave us with this. There's a story about what happened in the weeks after the end of World War II, in the refugee camps for orphans and dislocated kids. The children couldn't sleep at night with all that fear and terror filling their heads. But the grown-ups discovered that after you fed them, if you gave them each a piece of bread just to hold, they

would drift off. It was holding bread—a sign that there was more to eat if they were still hungry. This was bread to hold, to remind them and connect them to the great truth that morning would come, that there were grown-ups who cared and were watching over them, that there would be more food when they awoke.²

I have some bread for you this morning, and I don't wonder what would happen if we passed it around and everyone took a piece. Do you think there would be enough for us all? For the love of Christ and all God's children, there is. I tell you, there always is.

² I have told this story so many times since the first time I read it, except I can't recall where I read it. I do remember that I was perusing the writing of Anne Lamott at the time. I'm not sure my version does justice to the original, but if you know Anne Lamott, she'd probably be happy just to know I tried.