

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
11 July 2021

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

***“Free to Be: A Priesthood of Believers”***

Third of Four Baptist Freedoms: *Soul Freedom*  
Sixth Sermon in the 14-week summer series: *Free to Be*

*Joshua 24:14-15; 1 Timothy 2:1-5; 1 Peter 2:4-5, 16-17;*  
*Matthew 16:13-16; John 3:16-17*

New Revised Standard Version

I grew up singing this hymn – *I am Resolved* – with my youth group on Monday afternoons every summer. We’d go to a local nursing home to visit with the residents and sing to them in the lobby following their lunch time, and then later we’d all go over to someone’s house to swim and hang out.

I loved singing all the hymns, but this one, given the context, always struck me as a bit ironic, especially as we sang the refrain: “*I will hasten to Him, hasten so glad and free; (hasten glad and free)*...”<sup>1</sup> because as I looked around, I saw people who weren’t “free” – they were in a nursing home with locked doors; they couldn’t “hasten” anywhere – most, if not all, were in wheelchairs; and some perhaps you could call “glad,” at least – they had smiles on their faces – but most were hurting or just tired and dozing off – it was

right after lunch, so I don’t blame them.

But it just was odd to sing about “hastening” to Jesus and being “glad and free” to people who seemed, to me with my youth mind, stuck, sad, and immobile. But I learned quickly these were spiritual words, not literal ones.

One Monday, we walked into the nursing home and a woman, Gladys, who had been coming to hear us sing for at least 3-4 years, wasn’t there. I asked a friend of hers where she was and she gave me a blank stare. I walked down to Gladys’ room to go retrieve her, and her name wasn’t on the plaque outside of the room, the pictures were off the walls, and her bed was neatly made up. I knew what all this meant.

As I walked slowly back to the lobby realizing that Gladys was

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<sup>1</sup> *I am Resolved*. RESOLUTION. 10.6.10.6 with refrain.  
Words: Palmer Hartsough, 1896. Music: James H. Fillmore, 1896. *Celebrating Grace Hymnal*, 501.

gone, the friend that had just stared at me earlier motioned to me and I walked over. The youth group had already started singing, and they were singing, go figure, *I am Resolved*. And Gladys' friend said into my ear (pretty loudly to speak over the music), *"I reckon she's hastened on to Jesus, hon. Gladys is glad and free. Glad and free."*

We both smiled and I nodded. To this day when I hear the name Gladys I think of this hymn and the words, "glad and free." Indeed, one of the best gifts of faith is our freedom with God, but it's not just a freedom that comes in the hereafter, it is available here and now too.

The kind of freedom that this hymn speaks of and the kind of freedom that Baptists have espoused for centuries and the kind of freedom that Jesus invites us to – is a freedom of soul. Soul Freedom is the third of our four Baptist freedoms that we are exploring this summer.

Soul Freedom is about the deepest most complex and intrinsic parts of our psyches and hearts. Our "souls" are

really hard to define, and I won't try here, but what I do know is that while our mental faculties may go, and our physical capabilities may wane, and our emotional capacity may be stunted or harmed or repressed or depressed – our souls are always still there – protecting the very essence of who we are, no matter how much we've been harmed or how much we think we've achieved. As the Psalmist writes:

<sup>7</sup>*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*

<sup>8</sup>*If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

<sup>9</sup>*If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,*

<sup>10</sup>*even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.<sup>2</sup>*

Our soul cannot escape God. It is that which precedes us in this life and will continue to exist somehow, someday I believe, after we die. I don't know – I'm not a soul expert – but what I do believe is that our souls have something to do with the essence of what God sees when

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 139:7-10

God looks at us and calls us beloved.

Our soul is so deeply personal to each and every one of us – which is why it must be *free*. When Baptists speak of Soul Freedom, or Soul Liberty, we are affirming our freedom of conscience, “*the freedom and responsibility of every person to relate to God [if they so choose] without the imposition of creed, or control by the clergy or the government.*”<sup>3</sup>

Soul Freedom starts with the core understanding that each person is created in the image of God, the *imago dei*, which means we are “*capable and responsible, under God, to make moral, spiritual, and religious decisions for ourselves.*”<sup>4</sup> We have individual choice in our beliefs; our souls cannot be coerced, even if (sadly), our words and actions can be.

Because of this, our faith then, is “*personal, relational, and direct*”<sup>5</sup> – meaning, direct to God. We do not need a mediator, or a priest, to speak to God for us. Each and every one of us relates equally and directly to God. While this is great news,

I know it might disappoint some of you who think that I have a direct line of connection to God or something so that when I pray for you the prayer is more likely “to work.” Alas, that is not the case. Not only because God is not a vending machine for our prayer requests, but also because when God looks at me and looks at you – God sees the same potential and the same reality – a beloved child, not one of us greater than another. So, sure, keep sending me your prayer requests and I will most certainly keep praying – but know that Soul Freedom teaches us that your prayers are the same as mine!

This is what the Apostle Paul is getting at in his first letter to Timothy when he says that there is “*one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus,*” (1 Timothy 2:5). Paul is speaking into a context where priests and people in religious authority were the norm. Both in the Old Testament world and into the New Testament world, priests ensured proper worship and proper sacrifices took place. It was a special, ordained role and God spoke to priests and prophets in unique ways. They

<sup>3</sup> Information accessed on July 11, 2021 at <http://www.firstbaptist-cs.org/four-freedoms.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Information accessed on July 11, 2021 at <http://www.firstbaptist-cs.org/four-freedoms.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Information accessed on July 11, 2021 at <http://www.firstbaptist-cs.org/four-freedoms.html>.

were believed to be needed mediators of God's presence in the Jewish faith.

But one of the main messages of Christianity is that when God sent Jesus into the world to teach us how to live and love and in fact, to see what that love looks like when it's pushed to the extreme of suffering and death, and what that love looks like when it invites the miracle of resurrection into its being – then we see that the life to which God is inviting us to – a life of loving God with our full selves and loving neighbor as we love ourselves – is *something that is humanly possible*. Jesus' life mediates for us what a fully human life looks like, feels like, hurts like, overcomes like, teaches like, laughs like, cries like, etc. Jesus is the mediator of the divine experience to us and as such, becomes the mediator of the fullest and freest human experience to us as well.

And this is freeing because in understanding Jesus' love, we understand God's love. In understanding Jesus' life and purpose, we come to know our own life's purpose. And because Jesus is the ultimate mediator for us to God, that means that we do not need a human priest

to intercede for us with God – we can relate to God directly and this is where the phrase the *“priesthood of all believers”* comes in. It's not just that we are each our own priest and it's just *“me and God”* or *“me and Jesus.”* But rather that we are ALL priests to one another. There is an individual and a communal implication in the *“priesthood of all believers.”*

So first, the individual. Think of our Matthew text today, when Jesus asks his disciples, *“Who do other people say that I am?”* After they answer, he then follows up with the more personal and direct question, *“Who do YOU say that I am?”* (Matthew 16:13-16).

These two questions can be adapted for all of our beliefs. Most of our belief systems are so shaped by our parents (or those who raised us), the church or “non-church” of our upbringing, key mentors and teachers, culture and politics and society, T.V. and social media, the authors we read, the music we listen to, and the list goes on. But at some point, we take all of that in and it comes down to – *“Okay, that's what everyone else says, but what do YOU say? What do YOU believe? Who do YOU say that I*

*am?”* When we can answer that personal of a question in our faith journey, when we can articulate who Jesus is to us, it speaks of a truer freedom of our soul, that is not divorced from the influences and voices of our past, but rather is discerned in the midst of (and sometimes in spite of) all those other voices and influences.

The “*the priesthood of all believers*” is not unique to Baptists. All reformers, beginning with Martin Luther, emphasized this aspect – as a way of saying we are free to believe and interpret scripture how we see fit under the Spirit’s leading, not under how the Roman Catholic Church sees fit. More on this another time, but Baptists really took this idea of the “priesthood of all believers” to heart. We go so far as to say that if you are a baptized Christian, you too can baptize. You too, can serve communion. You do not need to be ordained or have special schooling to lead the two ordinances of our faith.<sup>6</sup> We are truly egalitarian in that way.

So celebrate! You, yourself, are a priest in your faith journey.

You are the connecting point from your soul to God. You may be saying, “Well, of course Pastor Anne, I already knew that. But while we may take it for granted this idea of Soul Freedom was unique in its day. People were used to having to pay indulgences (money) to priests in order to have their sins forgiven or to be “made right with God” and they had to depend on a priest to know anything about Scripture as they could not read the Bible in their own vernacular language! So it’s definitely not something to take for granted.

But as we see in 1 Peter 2:4-5, 16-17 today, once we freely choose our faith, we are to live in that freedom as a means of service towards others – not lording our belief over others saying, “we have the right way” but honoring everyone in a way that invites them into Soul Freedom as well.

I love how American Baptist preacher, Dr. Stephen Jones, talks about Soul Freedom:

*“[There is a phrase that is popular with many Baptists], the idea of soul-winning. I know*

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<sup>6</sup> In actual practice, many Baptist churches, such as our own, encourage ordination because we talk seriously the idea that if we are ALL priests and pastors, then the

priests and pastors need a priest or a pastor to help guide you.

*what is meant by it: that without Christ, the soul is lost and those who are involved in the saving of souls 'win' those souls for Christ...[To be honest,] I don't like the concept of soul-winning. The last thing I would want to do is to triumph over your soul, or to take possession of your soul, to win your soul, as in winning the lottery. What shall I do with it when I have won it?... "Soul-winning" sounds triumphal, like a military victory, like a numbers game."*

*"How many souls have you won? Hopefully, none! Souls are not meant for winning. They are meant to be deeply respected, even a tormented soul, especially a tormented soul. Never allow me or anyone else to take over your soul. I would be honored if you would reveal some part of your soul with me – [but] may I never take advantage, may I treat you with respect, yea, even with reverence if indeed the soul is where God's love is revealed."*

*"[However], I would be delighted to introduce you to the love of Christ, and deeply moved for you to allow that love to touch your very soul. But*

*soul liberty seems the opposite to me of soul-winning. Soul liberty is my encouraging, or helping to create the space for you to shape your own soul, to form your own faith, without my attempt to control or interfere or manipulate. Isn't that a beautiful thing?"*<sup>7</sup>

You see, Soul Freedom gives each person the right to shape their own faith, to reach within their own soul to form their own responses. *"We don't corral people; we don't crusade people; we grant people the spiritual space to approach God and to follow the dictates of their own soul. We don't ask for allegiance to a creed; we don't urge conformity. We invite individuals to approach God in Christ and then to create a style of discipleship that makes sense to themselves."*<sup>8</sup>

I love this because it reveals that yes, we are all individual priests, but it also emphasizes that we are to serve one another – we are each to exercise the duties that were once reserved especially for priests – we are to pray, to worship, to evangelize, to serve, to help, to heal, to confess, to forgive, to seek

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Stephen D. Jones, "Freedom of the Soul," Sermon from First Baptist Church, Kansas City, MO (9 February 2014), accessed on July 11, 2021 at <http://www.abc->

[usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/What-a-Heritage-of-Soul-Liberty.pdf](http://usa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/What-a-Heritage-of-Soul-Liberty.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Jones, *ibid*.

justice, to do kindness, to feed, clothe, and house the “least of these,” to free the captive, liberate the oppressed. The flip side of Soul Freedom is Community Liberation.<sup>9</sup>

We are always individuals, free to believe as we are led, but we always have a communal responsibility no matter what we believe. And each and every one of us takes part in the communal responsibility of being the Body of Christ in the world today. Of being the Liberator for the oppressed in the world, of being the Healer of the sick in the world, of being the Provider for the hungry and unhoused in the world. You’ve probably heard this before but the sign outside of our church should not say *Calvary Baptist Church*, but rather *Calvary Baptist Church Meets Here*. The church is not a building, it is a group of “priests” ministering out and about in the world!<sup>10</sup>

One way to remember the two sides of this responsibility as the “priesthood of all believers” is to not confuse “soul

competency” (S-O-U-L) with “sole competency” (S-O-L-E).<sup>11</sup> While Baptists certainly fought hard for the individual freedom of each S-O-U-L, we must never mistake that freedom as something that is just S-O-L-E-L-Y ours, without concern for how our freedom interacts with and indeed, helps or hinders, the freedom of others – regardless of their belief.

We need the community to keep us from being too individualistic in our beliefs. But belief does start with the individual. The Joshua text today reminds us that even from the earliest days, the Israelites, the people of God, had a choice as to who they would serve and believe and worship. Joshua, in his last speech before his death, is reminding his people of this saying, *“There are many gods you can worship and serve, including the gods your ancestors worshipped, but make a choice as to who you will serve...and remember that not making a choice, is making a*

<sup>9</sup> Working together for the collective freedom to which God is calling us – from the time of Moses and the Exodus, through the Exile and the Prophets, through to Jesus and the Resurrection – which is ultimate Liberation from death and the oppressive regimes of this world.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyn D. Blevins, “The Priesthood of All Believers,” *BaptistHistory.org* (2001), accessed at <http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistorigins/priesthood.html> on July 11, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Douglas Weaver, “James M. Dunn and Soul Freedom: A Paradigm for Baptist Political Engagement in the Public Arena,” *Thesis Approved by the Department of Church-State Studies, Graduate Faculty of Baylor University* (2008), accessed online on July 11, 2021 at [https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2104/5213/aaron\\_weaver\\_masters.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y](https://baylor-ir.tdl.org/bitstream/handle/2104/5213/aaron_weaver_masters.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y).

*choice.*” (paraphrase, Joshua 24:14-15)

Similarly in John 3:16-17, we learn that God sent Jesus into the world for salvific, saving purposes. The word “saved” here in Greek, *sozo*, means “*safe, sound, kept from destruction, to be saved from suffering, to be healed or made whole.*” Saved has a whole range of meanings, but essentially, when coupled with the life of Jesus that John describes for us, we see that Jesus saves us by giving us living water to never thirst again, by inviting us to the table to eat of the bread that will nourish and sustain, by seeing that our lives are Light that reflect the Light of our Creator and the Light of the World, that our words and actions give voice to the Word made Flesh.

We have a choice – each and every day – do we choose Life or do we choose Death, do we choose the Way of Jesus, the Way of Compassion and Love and Justice and Suffering, or the Ways of our own Preservation, the ways of Selfishness, Greed, Power, and Privilege. John tells us that our eternal life, our

everlasting life, comes when we freely make a choice to follow in the way of Jesus – that’s generally the one thing that we universally believe as Christians.<sup>12</sup> That’s why when we baptize we ask people what their profession of faith is and they say, “*Jesus is Lord,*” – which is the earliest confession of faith. We see it in several of Paul’s letters<sup>13</sup> and in Acts<sup>14</sup>. And the word “Lord” is significant, of course, because government rulers were called “Lord,” so to say “Jesus is Lord” was a spiritual statement with political implications! Both Jesus and Caesar cannot be Lord.

But then after that profession of faith of “Jesus is Lord” we follow up with, “*And do you intend to live in the way of Jesus, loving God with your whole heart, mind, body, and soul, and loving your neighbor as yourself*”? Because it’s not just about saying “we believe in Jesus” with words, it’s about that belief changes how we act in the world. Peter could say the right words (“*You are the Messiah*”), but his actions didn’t match his verbalized belief. He denied Jesus three

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<sup>12</sup> It’s so universal that according to Wikipedia, “Jesus is Lord” is the motto of the World Council of Churches – the most diverse ecumenical Christian body in the world.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Corinthians 12:3, Romans 10:9, Philippians 2:11, 1 Corinthians 6:11.

<sup>14</sup> Acts 8:16, Acts 19:5.



times. And of course, we know Jesus gave Peter a bunch of second chances, and chose to build the church on Peter, the Rock. And you could say – that’s one unstable rock! But here we are today. Jesus knew that Peter had to figure out things for himself, and that there would be lots of ups and downs, but that didn’t stop Jesus from seeing Peter as capable enough as one who could “feed his sheep” and minister to others because Peter had a community to keep him accountable.

The bottom line is that Soul Freedom is ultimately about what YOU believe, what YOU understand to be true about yourself, and your Creator (God) – and that is *not* something that anyone else can force upon you, even as a community will help you figure it out. But we will not “give you the answer” and you wouldn’t want us to!

I know it sometimes feels really weird and hard to believe differently than those around you – but it’s okay to believe something differently than someone else. It’s also okay to change what you believe throughout your life, or to change some things while holding on to others. That’s part

of what it means to be a person of faith on a journey of faith. We are always growing, learning, changing adapting. Part of Soul Freedom is allowing grace and space for your soul to grow and adapt and respond to God and respond to anything new you learn or experience.

I thank God every day that faith is a journey, and I can change my mind as I learn and grow and experience new things. The more I study and learn and experience, the more questions I have and the less answers I have, but alongside that, the more comfortable I become with questions as the heart and center of faith. Especially as I read the gospels and see how often Jesus answered people’s questions with questions, or how he told a story or parable to answer their question, which often then left them with more questions and some soul-searching to do...rather than a simple answer they could rationally understand and check off on their “checklist for a strong faith.” Faith is too personal for cookie cutter answers or a one-size-fits-all approach.

Today is all about freeing your soul and experiencing Freedom. Freedom from the voices inside

your head that tell you aren't good enough or that what you believe is wrong or that you can't trust your own experience. Freedom from the beliefs or teachings that no longer serve you. Freedom for you to disagree with me, or anyone else – but to still stay in community with me and everyone else. Freedom to think deeply with your heads and your hearts. Freedom to nurture your soul in the ways that are healthy and good for you. Freedom to release all the baggage and unhealthy or contradictory beliefs that don't make sense so that your soul can breathe more freely to follow how the Spirit is leading and not just how your upbringing or other people's expectations for your life are leading.

It matters less that we at Calvary all believe or think the same way; it matters more that we all love Jesus and want to follow in the way of his life – loving and serving as he did – and how that love transforms us and our world.

Beyond saying “Jesus is Lord,” we Baptists are free to disagree on pretty much everything else when it comes to our faith – and we do! We even disagree on what “Jesus is Lord” means! It's

very Baptist to dissent and disagree...so when you feel that way as you listen to me preach or as you sit and discuss scripture in a class or small group – know that you are doing something that is very Baptist.

You know, it's a very common thing for someone to meet with me and say that they don't know if they can be a member of Calvary or even if they can be a Christian because they don't believe a certain thing. That certain thing could be the Virgin birth of Jesus, the literal resurrection of Jesus, the doctrine of the Trinity, the omniscience or omnipotence (all knowing-ness or all powerful-ness) of God, or even just they are not sure how to make sense of Jesus in relation to other religions – or they don't know how to reconcile contradictions in scripture. And I have a lot of compassion for you all and a lot of interest in these conversations as I myself used to go and sit in my pastor's office and say, *“I don't believe in this or that and therefore I can't be a Christian.”*

Of course, some of you know my story and you know that it was in one such conversation with my pastor that he suggested God might be calling

me to ministry – and here I am today! What he knew then that I have come to know now, is that taking faith seriously often results in more doubt than assurance, more questions than answers.

I guess what I want to say to you today is: it is OKAY if you have questions, doubts, or misgivings about some of the “big traditional theological” beliefs of Christianity. You are in good company. Why do you think there are so many different denominations and branches of Christianity today? Because people can’t agree on what our faith is all about.

Faith is not about uniform agreement – it’s about individual authenticity...that is discovered and developed and lived out in community.

May you feel your Soul Freedom deeply today. Freedom to follow God in the way of Jesus, or freedom not too. But ultimately, freedom to know that it is the journey and the seeking that is the heart of your faith – not any destination of belief. The only destination is God – and God is already within you and around you. You have already arrived – in the love of God and in the grace of Christ.

The question is – will you recognize that you have arrived and that you are exactly where you need to be? That wherever you are in your journey it’s because the Spirit has led you here? Because if you can recognize that – you will feel free. Free to Be – whoever God has created and called you to be and Free to Believe – in whatever ways you need to, to make sense of God in the ways that give meaning to your life and that transform how you live.

Jesus welcomes you...and me...whether we hasten to him or head towards him in no hurry at all.

You are invited to make your way to Jesus – freely, faithfully, and fully you...

Amen.