Galatians 5:1,13-25
Third Sunday after Pentecost
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"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

When I was a little boy, I had a secret. A secret I didn't even have a name for until much later. A secret so dark and shameful that I thought I might die if I ever uttered it out loud. A secret I didn't understand but I knew without anyone telling me that it was wrong. Until they told me it was wrong. A secret that other people seemed to figure out about me long before I figured it out for myself. So I withdrew into myself, changing my mannerisms, the way I walked and talked, even the way I dressed. I confined myself to a self-constructed prison of denial and dissociation. Yoked to the enslavement of shame and fear……Until James Baldwin and Diana Ross, and my first love, a sweet man named Michael, rescued me, saved me, freed me. Freed me from the bondage of self, set free to live into the fully authentic being God created me to be.

I want to state a clear, resounding truth here: Freedom is not just a possibility. It's a promise. And it's not far off. It's not hypothetical. It's not just for heaven someday. It's for

now. For you. For your body. Your soul. Your story. “For freedom Christ has set us free.” Paul doesn’t say, “For order.” He doesn’t say, “For morality.” He doesn’t say, “For tradition.” He says, “For Freedom.” And we need to understand what that means. The yoke of slavery Paul warns against in Galatians isn’t just the old ritual laws or circumcision debates of the early church. It’s any system, sacred or secular, church or state, that demands you earn love, perform to belong, or reduce yourself in order to survive. It’s any yoke that replaces grace with fear. And not the self-centered, Western, individualistic version of freedom either. Not “I do what I want.” That kind of freedom always crashes into ruin. Just ask the prodigal son. Just ask anyone who seems to have it all, but wallows in self-hatred and misery, and inflicts it upon his neighbors, his community, his country. That was me. I bore the self-hatred and misery I was taught to carry for being gay in a homophobic religion and Black in a racist land. I was born into a body, Black and gay, that the world politicized from the beginning. I didn’t get to “opt in” to the conversation. My skin and my queerness made me a site of debate before I ever opened my mouth. And I carry that. But I also carry words of Baldwin and music of Miss Ross, and the love of Michael that pierced past my guards of self-loathing. For freedom Christ has set you free.

True freedom is relational. True freedom is restorative. True freedom returns us to ourselves and to one another. Scripture is full of this. Every healing story in the Gospels

is not just a physical cure-it's a return. When Jesus heals a leper, that man isn't just freed from disease. He's brought back into the community. When Jesus calls Zacchaeus down from the tree, He doesn't just forgive him. He dines with him, restoring his dignity in front of his neighbors. When the lost sheep is found, the whole flock rejoices. Freedom is never just for one. It's always communal. Always collective. Always about Shalom.

The great theologian Walter Brueggemann, who died earlier this month, said: "The Western notion of freedom is privatistic and individualistic. But in Scripture, freedom is relational. It is always about being restored to a community, to justice, to God." And I think this is why God's freedom is dangerous, because it refuses to play by the rules of empire. It disrupts. It disorients. It tears down golden calves, even the ones gilded with respectability, tradition, or economic success. Even our modern-day idols like Christian nationalism and xenophobic ideologies.

Brueggemann said: "The world for which you have been so carefully prepared is being taken away from you by the grace of God." That hits me. Hard. Because real freedom means you can't go back to pretending. You can't unknow what grace has revealed. You can't un-feel the Spirit inside you, stretching your soul wide enough to make room for your whole, complicated, beloved self. And that's terrifying. Because it requires

truth. And truth may wreck you before it remakes you. Confession doesn't sound like freedom, but I love that every week we confess our sins against God and our neighbor. For what we have done and for what we have left undone. We tell the truths about ourselves so that we may delight in God's will and walk in God's ways, in God's unending forever Freedom. That's it right there. Freedom is not about possession. It's not about performance. It's about truth. And that truth is a Person. And that Person is Christ. And Christ has set us free.

At the Library of Congress there's a collection called Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, which contains more than 2000 first-person accounts of slavery.

In 1937, an 88-year-old woman named Miss Fannie Moore told the story of her mother; enslaved, beaten, overlooked. One day, in the cotton field, her mother suddenly let out a yell. Full of the Holy Ghost, she began to shout and sing and dance. When the overseer demanded to know what the commotion was about, she said: "I'm free. The Lord done shown me the way." He beat her for it. But she kept shouting: "I'm free. I'm free. I'm free!"

That is the kind of freedom no empire can kill. That's resurrection freedom. That's "burst-the-tomb-wide-open" freedom. That's the kind of freedom Jesus carried in His wounds when He rose.

So, let me ask you: Where are the prisons in your life? Where are you still performing for love you already have? What golden calves do you need to leave behind? And what would happen if you let grace possess you? If you stopped trying to control your freedom and let yourself become it?

Because freedom is not cheap. It will cost you your illusions. It will break your mask into a thousand sacred pieces. But it will give you your name. Your story. Your voice. Your joy. Your freedom. And so, Calvary, this week, remember this: When you feel the prison of shame closing in, pause and whisper: "I'm free." When you're tempted to diminish your light, "I'm free." When you feel unworthy of love, let grace interrupt you: "I'm free." Go deeper, my beloveds. Into the heart of God. Into the gospel of grace. Into the freedom that waits for you with open arms and a feast prepared.

And may your Freedom be loud. May your Freedom be bright. May your Freedom be contagious. In the name of the One who sets us free.

Amen