

Exodus 12:11–12, 14 (CEB)

¹¹ This is how you should eat it [the Passover meal]. You should be dressed, with your sandals on your feet and your walking stick in your hand. You should eat the meal in a hurry. It is the Passover of the LORD. ¹² I'll pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I'll strike down every oldest child in the land of Egypt, both humans and animals. . . .

¹⁴ "This day will be a day of remembering for you. You will observe it as a festival to the LORD. You will observe it in every generation as a regulation for all time.

Exodus 14:19–29 (CEB)

¹⁹ God's messenger, who had been in front of Israel's camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It stood between Egypt's camp and Israel's camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn't come near each other all night.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two. ²² The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry. ²⁴ As morning approached, the LORD looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. ²⁵ The LORD jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!"

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry." ²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh's entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. ²⁹ The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

Mark 14:22–25 (CEB)

²² While they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." ²³ He took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ I assure you that I won't drink wine again until that day when I drink it in a new way in God's kingdom."

Galatians 5:13–18 (CEB)

¹³ You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. ¹⁴ All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. ¹⁵ But if you bite and devour each other, be careful that you don't get eaten up by each other!

¹⁶ I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. ¹⁷ A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do. ¹⁸ But if you are being led by the Spirit, you aren't under the Law.

A freedom meal . . . for a freed people.

Between last week and this, we have moved from the Fourth of July to Holy Communion. It is understandable to wonder what they could have in common. In a word, it is "freedom." Both are freedom parties; both celebrate liberty. Yet, we preachers know that what the Bible means by freedom has nothing to do with political or even social systems. Karen Engle Layman (no relation!), a UMC pastor in Pennsylvania, once wrote:

"Freedom is a word tossed about a lot in the United States. We tout freedom of speech, assembly, press, and religion, and even the right to bear arms. As children

of the enlightenment, we believe all people have an inalienable right to freedom. We take it for granted. But in spite of our affirmations about freedom, we argue over what these freedoms mean and to what extent we are free to exercise them. Individual freedom and the rights of the autonomous self to make decisions often conflict with the human community. For instance, we struggle with the freedom of journalists to write and to keep sources secret, and year after year we haggle over prayers in public places, and the NRA and handguns.

Apparently, despite our assertions about freedom, the term confuses us. When I read Galatians 5:1 to the laity in my Bible study, they said, "What on earth does that mean?" They found the statement perplexing. Perhaps we are confused when we read "For freedom Christ has set us free" (Gal 5:1) because Paul means something very different.¹

Layman notes that, according to the Anchor Bible Dictionary, in the Greco-Roman world the Greek word for "freedom," *eleutheria*, and the Latin word, *libertas*, meant basically 'doing whatever one wants.'

This is probably pretty close to how many of us would define freedom, at least until we had a few minutes to reflect on it. For "doing whatever one wants" is definitely not the biblical meaning of freedom. Hans Kung wrote, "The illusion of freedom is to do what I want. The reality of freedom is to want what God Almighty does." Paul wrote, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17).

Freedom from . . .

In nearly all biblical contexts, freedom is liberty as opposed to slavery. Thus, the OT speaks of freedom from bondage in Egypt, God's great act of salvation. It is vitally important to remember that the giving of God's Law at Mt. Sinai came *after* the Exodus. God chose the Israelites and freed them from slavery *before* God gave them the Law. If you bear this in mind, it will help you to understand why the Jews have never believed that they could earn their way into God's good graces by keeping the Law. They had already experienced God's grace in the Exodus. For an Israelite, it was now a matter of staying in God's grace-created community, not getting in. This meant keeping the Law, especially those very visible markers, such as circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the food laws that set the Israelites apart from the world around them.

But it is also true that the Law was accompanied by blessings and curses; blessings that would flow from keeping the Law (living rightly with God and one another) and curses, such as exile, that would fall on the Israelites when they did not love as they should.

Who is surprised that things go well when we love well and things go badly when we do not? Sadly, the story of Israel is much more about the curses than the blessings. Why? Because the Israelites were unable to keep the Law. Sure, they could get their children circumcised and avoid pork, but truly love God and neighbor? That was as difficult for them as it is for us.

Why can't we love as we should? For Paul, one explanation² is that we are enslaved to powers that hold us captive (see Galatians 4:8); slavery to these powers is fundamental to the human condition. It is this slavery that explains why we and our world are so messed up. We are slaves to Sin, which Paul speaks of as a cosmic power in 3:22. We are unable to do the simple acts of loving God and loving neighbor each day and in every way.

But we have been freed from this slavery by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. It is Christ who has freed us and not we ourselves. It is Christ who has defeated the enslaving

¹ from Karen Engle Layman's reflections on Galatians 5:1-15 in the July 2000 issue of *Interpretation* journal.

²This is not the only explanation we find in Paul, but it is key to understanding what he means by slavery and freedom.

powers. It is Christ who has taken upon himself the Law's curses. By his faithfulness all the way to his unspeakable death on a Roman cross, it is Christ who has defeated sin and, hence, death. In that last Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus spoke to them of a New Exodus, one which would lead them from sin to a New Covenant with God.

The New Covenant

Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unable to live as God had taught them. They proved unable to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his Law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer even have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

Which brings us to Jesus. Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. Jesus ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. On that early spring evening in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction,"³ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. But now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood.

And so we share this feast of the new covenant, this reshaping of the Passover meal around our Lord. And the question before us all is this – what will we do with the freedom God purchased at so high a price?

Freedom for . . .

Jesus Christ has freed us to new life. How does God hope we will use our God-given liberty? To put a slight twist on it, we are free to do whatever we want, but only so long as our wants are God's wants. And what does God want? Simple: love God and love neighbor. That's what God wanted from the ancient Israelites. That's what Jesus came to preach and to live out in his willingness to lay down his life for us. That's what God does and that's what God wants. As Paul puts it, in Peterson's rendering, "Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything

³ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself."

Paul's letters can seem pretty daunting at times. The writer of 2 Peter certainly found them to be so (2 Peter 3:15-16). But even Paul reads Scripture as a narrative with a plot, a plot in which he finds himself and these new Christian colonies he is starting and for which he is fighting. If we are going to understand ourselves and our world, we have to find ourselves in this story as well. It is in the larger story of God and his creation that we can find the true meaning of freedom and learn how God desires us to use the freedom he has given us.

Daily Bible Readings

More on freedom

Monday, Exodus 11:1-12:42 The story of the Hebrews' escape from Egypt

Tuesday, Exodus 12:43 -13:16 The instructions for the Passover

Wednesday, Ezekiel 36:22-37:14 God promises to restore his people.

Thursday, 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 Paul instructs the church about the Lord's Supper.

Friday, Galatians 5:1-5:18 The longer Galatians passage on freedom

Saturday, Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:11-22 The new covenant and the use of Jesus' blood

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Ruth.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the parables of Jesus.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy

Current series: *Amazing Stories*