

Sermon January 31, 2021 by Pastor Jon Haug

Let me start with a delicious, mouth watering image: a fresh out-of-the-oven, chocolate-chip cookie. There are few smells, and sights that I am weaker to resist than grabbing a still warm chocolate-chip cookie and taking a bite. I'd rather a chocolate chip cookie than cake for my birthday every year. Can you taste it? Pause this video now if you have an irresistible urge to go grab yourself a glass of milk!

Now, I have a really odd cookie scenario for you to ponder this morning. Imagine you are back at church at the coffee hour, I know, you may have to dredge up the recesses of your mind at this point to do so, but humor me. You know where the coffee is at St. John's don't you? If you are a visitor and you were just in our sanctuary, let me give you instructions. Find your way out of one of the exits, the exit by the front of the sanctuary is faster, but you'll miss telling the preacher what you thought of their sermon if you go that way, find your way out into open air and down the steps, watch out for any running kiddos, they know where the cookie are or watch out for some of our spry 80 year old who also like to rush there too, let's be honest, and tucked back underneath the balcony in the courtyard you'll find a table that holds the black liquid gold for California Lutherans and Lutherans almost anywhere and next to them, our cookies!

And you find this warm chocolate chip-cookie right there. But on this day, you notice a visitor, an earnest unfamiliar face, a face aglow with the newness of having experienced a church service that has inspired them to perhaps consider this church as a new church home. You see the doe eyes approach you merely a second after you have acquired a still warm chocolate-chip cookie. The sermon was ok, the music catchy, but this cookie, my oh, my, this cookie is the Gospel for you this day and you don't even care about the idolatry of that statement. But this new face seeks you out. After a few small pleasantries, and your thoughts that the perfect window of warmth of your cookie is rapidly diminishing, this person asks you a question, "You're not going to eat that cookie are you? My pastor

told me that eating chocolate on Sunday leads you to sin? Am I wrong? Honestly, I'd be a little offended to see you eat that cookie."

You look around at the countless others eating and savoring their cookies and wonder what sin you committed to deserve being the welcoming person to this overzealous newcomer.

So...do you eat the cookie?

In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he doesn't name chocolate-chip cookies specifically, but he does raise the issue of food and Christian freedom. He encourages the people to think about their actions, how they are living out the freedom of the Gospel that they have learned, which is that they are freed from the bonds of sin, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and specifically how they will live *that* out in the messy and complicated community where not everyone has this knowledge. He literally encourages them to avoid eating food that may confuse newbie converts or visitors even if it means not eating something you'd like or know is fine and not leading you to sin. He writes, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." In fact I don't think anyone has stated the paradoxical nature of Christian freedom more clearly than that pastor from the 1500's from whom we have our denominations namesake, Martin Luther himself. In 1520 he wrote this:

"A Christian is the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one."

But how does this paradoxical knowledge of the freedom of a Christian work exactly? Well, freed by the fear of death due to our sin by the saving power of Jesus, God's child, and Christ's willingness to love us to the point of suffering death on the cross and being raised from that death, we have been freed to live lives of grace. And the only true response to that freedom is to live in response to that love by serving others in love too. And there you have the paradox of Christian freedom:

Freed by grace to serve others graciously.

Now if I'm honest, I've been thinking about Christian freedom and comparing and contrasting that with American freedom a lot lately. The images of the Capital and the riot that broke out there just before the transfer of power in this nation still make their way quite literally into my dreams. But I've been troubled, then and for some years now, by a kind of cultish Christian Nationalism that seems to conflate these two freedoms into one. You saw it when you saw banners that said Jesus 2020 with American flags waving nearby as rioters broke into the Capital and attacked the Capital police with violence. Those images along with them coinciding with nooses and the Confederate flag, left so many of us troubled about the violence we saw that day in an attempt to overthrow the foundations of our democracy. So I've been reading about and wondering about what true freedom means as a Christian *and* an American.

Christian freedom might best be understood again, by that Luther quote: "as the most free lord of all, and subject to none; a Christian is the most dutiful servant of all, and subject to every one." And leading a Christian life means being transformed, means using this lens of Christ to view the whole world, as your northstar, guiding light, your awakening, your compass. It means holding your Christian value system up and over any other one you may have to guide your thinking and actions even your American value system.

And this might be where the two freedoms, Christian and American get muddled and tricky. Some people, quite a few actually, have sort of combined these ideas into an ideology called Christian Nationalism that may lead one down a path to idolatry. Here's an example of a belief held by an ideal Christian Nationalist:

The founding documents like the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence were divinely inspired.

*68.4% of white protestant evangelicals believe this is true.

That's two thirds. If you hold this belief you are in muddy waters and you may want to talk to a pastor or someone you trust about it. From a statement and statistic like that you can begin to imagine how Christian freedom is getting wrapped up and confused at a Capital riot with American flags waving, Jesus banners, and racists symbols all side-by-side.

Real Christian freedom starts by being based in the authority of Christ. We see this in the Gospel of Mark today. Jesus comes into the temple teaching and the people listening are astounded. He seems to have an unexpected affect and authority. Even spirits obey him as the man is relieved of his demons and restored to community. They declare: "What is this? A new teaching--with authority?" So if Christ is the author of this new kind of freedom then we must continually use his life, teachings, death on a cross, and resurrection, as our true guide to our lives and freedom. In so doing, it would be idolatry to hold our country's founding documents in the same light and authority as our Holy Bible. But it might be easy to make this mistake in a nation that was formed "under God" and has often led with a manifest destiny.

We must, as Christians first, and American citizen's second, take care in how we live out our gracious freedom. We must find a clear way to be patriotic while still Christian if we are to be followers of the true Gospel. Because in all honesty, a Christian, a follower of the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, cannot perform acts of violence to gain power.

The Christian way, the way of the cross, is decidedly non-violent.

The understanding of this is why those who have seen the play *Hamilton* laugh when the King of England beautifully and articulately sings to his American subjects on the precipice of the Revolutionary War trying to influence their loyalty through his authority, "Cause when push comes to shove, I will kill your friends and family to remind you of my love, Da da da dat da..." We know inherently that killing and violence are not good reminders of love. Acts of violence to gain power over others is a twisting of the real Gospel into something it isn't. I may dare to say being an

authentic Christian no longer allows one to operate by the cliches of “It’s just business, nothing personal” or no longer allows you to easily accept without wrestling with phrases like “just war” or “necessary collateral”. True Christian freedom is not a selfish, me, me, me, I can do whatever I want because I’m free, kind of freedom. The American value of individual freedoms in the face of oppressive government is really at it’s best when we recognize that it was originally for the common good too, that it was based in a not yet realized and still to this day maturing ideal that “all men are created equal,” language that for the first time in our history may warrant some updating with Kamala Harris being sworn in.

To live a Christian life authentically, to be transformed by the authority of Christ, to be a real follower of Jesus is to demote your other lenses and value systems and make the true Gospel the most important one, the one that wins out as the guide of your whole life.

Because deep down you know, only through Christ would you ever have the ability to put down that chocolate-chip cookie for that visitor you just met, because you can tell in your heart, despite your stomach, that eating that warm delicious cookie may affect their faith in God. It’s the Christian ethic that all of us are children of God and therefore we must see Christ in all people, even ones we may count as enemies or adversaries, or from a different line of thinking, and do so without violence to them in any way. It actually starts with seeing and listening. Or we don’t get the true Gospel. And we don’t offer the true Gospel to others.

So I ask you, as a Christian, what freedom would you be willing to give up, to help the faith of another?

AMEN.