

TEXT: Romans 13:11-14
THEME: Doing good make you happy, fulfilled
SUBJECT: Freedom
TITLE: Wake Up

First Sunday of Advent
01 December 2019
Messiah Moravian
Jerry Harris

The autonomous self, the self governed only by its own desires, is the holy grail of modern life. We see commitment as constraint, especially life-long commitments to others, to principles, to promises, to ideals, to institutions.

The notion that such commitments are the building blocks of character strike us as old fashioned. These commitments are now seen as shackles compromising our pursuit of happiness.

For Patty Berglund in Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom*, the illusion of freedom as absence of constraint plus unlimited options is revealed in a moment of self-pity. By almost any standard she lived a luxurious life. She had all day every day to figure out some decent and satisfying way to live, and yet all she ever seemed to get from her choices and all her freedom was more miserable. The reader is almost forced to conclude she pitied herself for being so free.

The luxury of doing whatever we want, whenever we want, is the dream sold by every investment company. But Patty, like so many others, finds that this only leads to a different kind of misery.

For a long while, the pleasures offered by such "freedom" can give the allure of fullness. So believed the prodigal son fleeing home with half his father's wealth to do as he pleases, wherever he pleases, with whomever he pleases.

But then, like the child on a field trip sidling up to the dinner buffet without his mother curtailing his appetite, he slowly reaches the point where his freedom feels like nausea. Engorged, he's rethinking his choices. On the far side of such freedom, sometimes a long way down the road, is regret.

The shadow cast by this kind of freedom can be very dark. "I loved my ways, not God's," Augustine realized. "The liberty I loved was merely that of a runaway." In fact such freedom often slides back into its own form of enslavement. Doing as he pleased, Augustine made his way "to the shackles of gratification, and was gleefully trussed up in those afflicting bonds."

This dynamic of freedom lost - especially a lost freedom experienced as if it were liberation - would occupy Augustine for the rest of his life. Ultimately, he came to see himself in chains. If he had hoped to find himself - and freedom - by escaping constraints, Augustine realized he was his own worst master.

It is a terrible and terrifying thing to know what you want to be and then realize you're the only one standing in your way - to want with every fiber of your soul to be someone different, to escape the "you" you've made of yourself, only to fall back into the self you hate, over and over again.

Eventually, the satisfaction of unconstrained desires settles into the predictability of a habit - probably just about the time it's no longer a pleasure. The thrill has lost the sheen of novelty; one hit isn't enough. But by then the habit has become a necessity and what I want is a moot point: this is what I'll chase because this is what I need.

The irony is that my freedom of choice brings me to the point where I need someone else to give me a will that is actually free. And not merely free to choose - since that is what got me here in the first place - but free to choose the good.

If freedom is going to be more than mere freedom *from*, if freedom is the power of freedom *for*, then I have to trade my autonomy for a different kind of governance.

The paradox is that freedom comes wrapped in the gift of constraint, the gift of law, a command that calls us into being. Freedom doesn't expand with the demolishing of boundaries or the evisceration of constraints. Freedom flourishes when a good will is channeled toward the Good by constraints that are gifts.

This was Augustine's experience in the garden when he heard children chanting a curious song, "Pick up and read, pick up and read." Augustine interpreted this as a divine command.

He picked up the volume of Paul's epistles lying nearby, opened it and read the first verse he saw, which was a command: "Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Constraints as gift. What an odd notion. Yet, a train is free when it stays on the tracks. If a train could think for itself, it might decide that freedom could be found if it jumped the tracks and made its own path away from the steel rails. When trains do this disaster ensues.

We are free when we are guided by the law of God given for the flourishing of life. We are free when we are governed by what is honorable, what is good, what is true. Just as the fish is made for water, so are we made to live and move and have our being in the realm of light, governed not by works of darkness but by faith, love and hope.

Freedom, Merton wrote, is the perfect love and acceptance of what is really good so that everything you do is good and makes you happy. When everything you desire is truly good and every choice not only aspires to that good but attains it, then you are free because you do everything that you want, and every act of your will ends in perfect fulfillment.