

Freedom from Chains

Sermon for the 15th Sunday after Trinity

Sermon Text: Galatians 5:25-26, 6:1-3, 7-10

If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another. ^{6:1} Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³ For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself... ⁷ Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. ⁸ For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

This past week, something terrible happened. A 22-year-old woman was killed in Iran and subsequently, many others. What hurts us and saddens us is not just that she died, but also how she died. Mahsa Amini died because she wasn't properly dressed as a woman. We mourn not only for her, but for all women who, like her, are oppressed or who have to die because a harsh law has oppressed them. And so, we pray and ask God to give women throughout the whole world, but especially in Iran, freedom. Freedom so that they can live and breathe easily, that they aren't deprived of their dignity or have to die because they believed the wrong thing or thought the wrong thing or because they weren't dressed properly according to the law. But we also want to ask the question: What exactly is freedom? And how can we obtain this freedom for ourselves and other people? And we want to ask the question: what does it mean to be free? This question of freedom can give rise to different answers. When I was in school, I thought freedom meant being free from school. At that time, for years, we children had no other dream than this: to be free from school! Free to make decisions for yourself and not to be restricted by parents' rules or by school! When the last day of school finally arrived, we burned our school uniforms in a huge fire. Many a book was also thrown into the fire and we had the feeling of finally being free! However, we children quickly realized that freedom from school and freedom from the protection of our parents' home is actually not the definition of freedom. We very quickly realized that the rules of school and our parents were replaced by other laws. For example, we were suddenly confronted with the issue of having to provide for our own livelihood and to do that, you had to work. Before we knew it, we were confronted with new rules and laws that were much worse than the school's laws! We very quickly noticed that not all rules and laws are bad. And that's the question we want to deal with today. To what extent is it good that I allow myself to be restricted by rules? And in what way is it good that I give other people the authority to control my life? And when does a law become a depressing burden that turns people's lives into hell so that there is only the smell of hatred and blood throughout the land? The Apostle Paul experienced life firsthand under such a depressing law. He was himself a representative of the law. He wanted to force Jewish Law on all people and also didn't hesitate to kill people who didn't want to abide by these laws. Paul received glory and honor through this path of the law. He was a renowned representative of the teachers of the law at that time. Paul also didn't lack money. In certain respects, Paul, as a radical lawyer, had been given great liberties which gave him many rights that others didn't have. Within the framework of the strict law, he could do whatever he wanted, even at the cost of his neighbors. And yet Paul was on the completely wrong path at this time. "Do not be deceived!" the apostle warns the Galatians. "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." (Gal. 6:7-8) With these words, Paul describes how we, in our longing for freedom, can be greatly deceived. Paul, as a representative of the law, could enjoy many benefits! And yet he wasn't free. He was bound to his own feelings! He was bound to something much worse than any government. He was bound to Satan. And at the same time, the Apostle Paul establishes that the life of a Christian is not at all about being free from everything and everyone! No! We make ourselves servants of Jesus Christ! We bind ourselves to Him and therefore have a close connection to God. We are God's servants and only then do we actually experience true freedom! This freedom in Christ is based on a different foundation than all other freedoms. Paul wants



to lead us to this foundation of freedom. There is nothing wrong with wanting to live in freedom without oppression in this world. It is also not wrong to want or get recognition from people. But what do we do when someone else wants or has the same recognition? What do we do if my freedom restricts the freedom of another person? Already in the first pages of the Bible we read about this. Cain obviously had a completely different idea about what freedom is than his brother Abel. And that's why Cain simply got rid of his brother so that he could be free without restraint and could enjoy his benefits. The first murder in human history grew from Cain's disappointment and his lies. It is still the same to this day! Now you

might say that people should just get out of the habit of being so jealous of one another. We should finally learn to seek peace and do good, then we wouldn't have any more problems! But that's not the suggestion that Paul makes here! Paul wants to get to the root of evil and therefore leads our attention to the sprouting seed. When we talk about freedom, it's about sowing! If we sow to ourselves, we will reap nothing but evil. Then we see neighbors as opponents. Then, just like Cain, we have to eliminate the others. And so it quickly happens that we oppress or belittle our neighbors so that we can make ourselves greater. That's exactly what Cain did to his brother, as well as Paul, when he was a teacher of the law. When you are the one who is stronger, greater, smarter than others, it feels good. In the moment Cain killed his brother, he must have had a feeling of great power, same with Paul when he killed others to become great. But that is a tremendous mistake. Whoever thinks that he becomes greater by oppressing others is extremely mistaken. Paul says: "For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself." (Gal. 6:3) But it can be so easy because God doesn't want to belittle or oppress us. When we bind ourselves to God, He doesn't make us slaves. On the contrary, in God through Christ, we first become truly free. When we rely upon ourselves and our own ego, we then run into emptiness and we deceive ourselves. Instead, Jesus Christ places Himself in our life! He wants to be our foundation! He wants to be our glory! We may sow upon Him! And then God looks to us and sees Jesus Christ in us. Then He says to you: "You are precious to me! I love you! I like you! And I take great joy in you!" That's how much God wants to honor us. And Paul saw all of this as freedom and God wants to give this freedom to us. He wants to give this freedom to children who want to determine their own lives. He likewise wants to give freedom to people who protest in Iran as well as to those who stand behind the strong weapons of the state and see other people as their enemies. To all these people I want to say: Peace is possible! Freedom is possible! It is possible in Christ! And this freedom in Christ is possible for every one of us! It is possible when Christ lives in us because what Christ produces within us is the exact opposite of what the law of Cain and the law that oppresses people produces in people! Instead of oppressing others, I can carry the burdens of others. Instead of killing an innocent person, I can help! All of this starts small. It begins with seeing that I urgently need God's forgiveness. It begins with seeing that I urgently need Jesus. And when I see His love, I can also accept others and carry their burdens, just like Jesus carries my burdens. For example: I recently had the great privilege of seeing the Frauenkirche (Church of Our Lady) in Dresden again. The Frauenkirche was completely destroyed during the Second World War. It was just a huge pile of rubble and then people began to rebuild. Some bought or repaired just a single stone. But this single stone has contributed to the fact that this great church can stand beautifully again today. That's exactly how it can be done! I can sow a single stone of love. I can forgive a single person. I can carry the love of Christ out into this evil world. And then a miracle happens. A great new building emerges and we may all be a part of it! In these days, I am sad about the situation in Iran and think above all on the women of Iran. Yet I am also excited about Iran! I am excited because so many Iranians are engaged in this great building of love. They are people who, like me, are enthusiastic about this Christ! People who unburdened their guilt at His feet! People who started to spread love instead of hate. That's why I see great hope and a budding new life in Iran! Amen.