

FROM THE DESK OF BISHOP MAAS

LET FREEDOM RING



In his great work, “The Freedom of a Christian,” Martin Luther famously wrote that “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all subject to none” AND “a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. This seemingly irreconcilable tension is the reality in which disciples are called to live.

Ultimately it is a tension that only seems irreconcilable. As Luther explains, through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, we are set free from everything—sin, death, the devil; our own pride, ego, fears—so that we are ultimately subject to no one and no thing in this world. God has claimed us, and we are free from any other claim on our allegiance, time, possessions or energy.

At the same time, because we follow Christ who “though he was in the form of God did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave...” [Philippians 2:6-7a], we desire to follow him in becoming servants ourselves. We can choose to do this not because we must, or because it’s how we earn our salvation. Rather, because our salvation has already been assured by Christ, we’re free to choose to serve God by serving others, to live lives—freely!—of true meaning.

This can be a real head-scratcher, to be sure. But the tension between the two truths of our existence—that we are wholly free people and freely whole servants—helps us understand and live fully into the many shades of gray that make up so much of our lives.

Ours is a culture that tends to oversimplify things and make them black-and-white. More often, it stresses that things be black OR white, and that there is nothing between the two. We know better. Life is filled with grays, and it’s there where most of life happens. Yes, it can be frustrating to have to deal with conundrums, to live in the tension. It’s so much easier to say “this always” or “that never,” but most of the time, those things can only be said if we ignore reality and deny the human condition.

Living in this tension is where grace comes into play—not the cheap grace that says, “anything goes, nothing matters,” but the costly grace that says, “though there be a cost to it, I can give up my certainty for the sake of God’s call and for the sake of my neighbor.”

Is it hard to live in this tension? Yes. Is it difficult to practice this grace? Absolutely! But the cross means nothing if it isn’t seen as the means whereby God is reconciled to humanity and humanity is reconciled to itself. Because it is the symbol—and the means—of that reconciliation, we can live freely and abundantly in life and in grace. This is a part of the brilliance of Luther’s theology I wish we could communicate more freely and live more fully.

Were we able to convince others to live in this tension (and let’s be honest, most days it would be enough to convince ourselves), we would discover whole new worlds of potential. Division could give way to unity, conflict could yield to resolution, and much of what is now impossible could now become possible.

Living in that tension would mean, as Luther taught, experiencing true freedom—the only real freedom there is to know. God grant that that freedom be a hallmark of our lives. And let that freedom ring.