

“A Time for Freedom”:
A Sermon Preached at Knox United Church (Parksville, B.C.)
on June 20th 2010 (Fourth Sunday after Pentecost)
by Foster Freed

Galatians 3: 23-29

The German film *Bella Martha*—for some odd reason it was given the ungainly title *Mostly Martha* when the English subtitled version was released...

...the German film *Bella Martha* is a gentle romantic comedy that centres on the life of its heroine, the aptly named Martha. Aptly named: because Martha is most definitely a worker bee, not unlike the Biblical Martha of Luke’s Gospel. And like that other Martha, the Martha of *Bella Martha* spends an inordinate amount of *her* time and lavishes an inordinate amount of her energy within the confines of a kitchen. Unlike the Biblical Martha, however, “Bella” Martha’s kitchen is very high-end. Working as the head chef in a luxury restaurant, Martha is obsessed with food. Indeed: she is so single-minded in her devotion to her craft that her employer insists Martha see a therapist. Somewhat predictably, Martha—rather than sharing the contents of her life—spends most of those therapeutic sessions sharing the contents of her recipes with her long-suffering therapist!

Martha’s life takes an unexpected turn, however. Her sister and her niece—enroute for a visit with her—are involved in a serious car crash. Her 8 year old niece, Lina—who scarcely knows Martha—manages to survive the crash, but Martha’s sister is killed, leaving Martha to try to care for the young girl until her father can be located. All of a sudden, Martha’s highly-regulated life is turned upside down; all of the familiar patterns that worked for her—all of the life-recipes she has been studiously following in order to keep herself on an even keel—no longer compute when there is an unpredictable (and still grieving 8-year old) sharing Martha’s small apartment. Quite predictably, the tension between Martha and her niece reach a breaking point, things getting so bad that the young girl attempts to run away. When Martha finally catches up to her, in a moment of insight and tenderness and regret, Martha (master chef that she is) turns to her young niece and says: “I wish I had a recipe *for you* that I could follow.”

I wish I had a recipe. I wish I had a recipe for you that I could follow.

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In his letter to the churches of the ancient Province of Galatia—think modern day Turkey—in his letter to the churches of Galatia, the Apostle Paul has come face to face (much to his irritation) with a group of Christians who were looking for, yearning for, a recipe. Paul had founded these Christian communities. Subsequent to their founding, however, other leaders appear to have followed in Paul’s footsteps, arguing (in effect) that Paul had established these churches on the basis of an incomplete Gospel. While these other Apostles would have agreed with Paul that the centre of Christian life is

discipleship—the following of Christ—they also insisted that new Christians (even those drawn from a non-Jewish background) were obligated...

...it's the sense of obligation that would have driven Paul to distraction...

...were *obligated* to obey the Jewish laws, the law code of Moses. Fair to say...fair to say that the letter to the Galatians (virtually its every word!) is an attempt at combating that perspective! Fair to say that Paul, from start to finish, attempts to craft a message to the Galatians that stresses their freedom from the Mosaic Law: a message that abolishes all of the finely wrought legal distinctions between men and women, slave and free, above all Jew and Gentile.

And let's be clear that Paul, as he sets out to do this, is walking quite the tight-rope. Paul is thoroughly Jewish. That was clearly true of Paul on the day of his birth; I have no doubt it was equally true of Paul as he drew his last breath. And so, what Paul *cannot* say to the Galatians...

...he cannot say it because he does not believe it...

...what Paul cannot say is that the Mosaic code is a gigantic mistake or, worse still, a gigantic fraud. Paul believes in the authenticity of the Mosaic tradition; believes that what Moses received, he received from God. But what Paul also believes is that the times they were a-changing. What Paul believes, above all else, is that God-in-Jesus Christ has begun a new thing. What Paul believes is that the God of Jesus—the God of Moses!—the God who has promised to make all things new, has begun that work of newness in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And so, a way of life that made sense up to and including the time of Jesus, is now no longer central...no longer central, at least not in the life of those (like the Galatians) who have come before God in the name of Jesus Christ. A new day has dawned! A new time has been ushered in. A time for faith! A time...for freedom.

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Paul's notion of time...no less than Paul's notion of freedom...may strike us as odd. For Paul, God's time...at any rate God's time with and for us...is not static time. God and God's love may well be unchanging; as Hebrews puts it, God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. But that doesn't mean that God's unchanging love cannot employ different tactics and strategies as it attempts to reach out to the likes of you and me. Just as we instinctively recognize the changing "times" in the life of a human being (God help us if we attempt to relate to our 16 year old the way we related to her when she was still our 3 year old!), Paul's argument to the Galatians is grounded in the belief that the human race *as a whole* also goes through changing times. And so he writes in his letter to the Galatians that *before faith came*...

...notice that this is a before-and-after argument; a time-based argument...

...**before** faith came we were imprisoned and guarded under the law...that the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came...but **now**...

...that was then, this is now...

....**now** that faith has come, we are **no longer** subject to a disciplinarian. No longer, in other words, subject to the law. It had its place, the law did! It had its time. But that time, according to Paul, is now gone. Now is the time for faith. Now is the time for freedom...including, first and foremost, freedom from the law. Freedom...freedom from the law.

That freedom...that holy freedom...makes Christianity (in my humble opinion) both a glorious faith tradition, as well as a deeply frustrating faith tradition. As human beings...as men and women...plunked down in a world that is both deeply mysterious and (more often than not) deeply puzzling, we all yearn for neat and tidy formulas...

...neat and tidy recipes, much the way master-chef Martha yearned for a neat and tidy recipe that could help her relate to her 8-year old niece. But the Gospel—certainly any form of the Gospel that takes Paul and Galatians with even a modicum of seriousness—refuses to hand us neat and tidy formulas, refuses to offer us neat and tidy recipes that we can simply plug into our mix-masters with guaranteed results. Then again, anyone who has ever done serious cooking knows just how dicey even the best recipes can be until you have made them your own. And maybe that's the point: even the best recipe is no substitute for a life lived faithfully...for a life lived in the freedom of faith.

But that leaves a very real question, a question that simply cannot be ducked and shoved to one side. If Paul is correct, assuming that Paul has it right and we, who follow Christ, really and truly live in a time of freedom, in a time *for* freedom, what in the world are we to do with our freedom? In other words: how then *are* we to live?

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I believe that Paul—were we to ask him—would give us a two-fold answer. Part of his answer would involve the work of the Holy Spirit. Even those of us who know a great deal about the written legacy of Paul, tend to under-estimate the centrality of the Holy Spirit as a factor in Paul's thinking. It's sometimes said that for Paul the great "opposition" is between "law and Gospel". I think that way of putting things misses the mark. I think for Paul the real opposition is between "law and Spirit". Why do we no longer need an external "disciplinarian" in the form of the law? Paul's answer? Because the Spirit is alive and at work, not only in our midst but within our inner being, that's why!

And the tragedy, of course, is that very few of us (including the present occupant of this pulpit!) have as much time for the Spirit as the Spirit has time for us! It is truly wonderful that contemplative prayer is making a comeback in churches such as Knox;

we now have a Monday night centering prayer group to complement our Saturday morning centering prayer group, for which I can only give thanks! Through such experiences of prayer—first and foremost through such experiences of learning simply to listen in silence for God’s gentle stirring—we can begin to detoxify ourselves from the noisy, busyness of the world in which we live. And while such experiences of silence do not provide a neat and tidy formula—a recipe—for faithfulness, they do provide a space in which we can begin to sense God’s leading as we find our place in this complex, ever-changing world. The Spirit...God’s lively, life-giving Spirit, is a large part of Paul’s answer to what it means to live in this time, this time of freedom, this time of faith. Beyond that?

Beyond that...the example of the Christ, the example of the Christ who we believe lives here and now, but who most definitely did live then and there. And the intriguing thing is that you and I—from a distance of 2000 years—may actually be as well positioned to access the life of Christ as was Paul, who appears not to have had any personal contact with the earthly Jesus, and who did not have the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Luke and John, at his disposal the way we have them at our disposal. You see, we go to scripture not chiefly in search of a law...not primarily (God forbid) in the hope of stumbling upon neat-and-tidy formulas for life, quick and snappy recipes for living, but primarily in the hope that we will become familiar with the model of faithfulness that was lived out in Christ. And while answering, in any given situation, the question “What Would Jesus Do?” is a bit trickier than we sometimes imagine it to be, it’s not a bad question to incorporate into our practice of discernment. And while it may also be the case that cultivating the mind of Christ leaves us much freer than any law-code would likely leave us, it’s also the case that cultivating the mind of Christ will make demands of us that no law code would ever dare to make. Demands of sacrificial sharing....deep giving....selfless offering of our very lives. That’s how Christ lived his life...how could his life not raise just such questions for the likes of you and me?

And it goes without saying...although it looks like I am about to go ahead and say it anyhow...it goes without saying that the word both Paul and Jesus would have utilized to describe such a life is the word “love”: love of God, love of neighbour. It’s a dangerous word, an easily sentimentalized word: a word that is especially dangerous because we so often use it to speak about our feelings, especially our feeling of being “in” love. From the perspective of the Gospel, however, love is much more than a feeling. It’s a practice...better still a set of practices...a set of practices that lead to a way of life in which love is not merely “felt” but actually lived. For us as for the Martha’s of this world...

those whose kitchens are well stocked with an endless abundance of recipes as well as a seemingly endless supply of provisions with which to turn out those recipes...

....for us as for the Martha’s of this world, life eventually teaches that there is no sure-fire formula, no neat and tidy recipe, no infallible code of law that can force us *to* love, let alone show us *how* to love. After all: this is father’s day, and if

my experience as a father has taught me anything, it has taught me that I cannot use a script with which to love my children. Rachael and Jordan are different people; if I try to offer my love to Rachael in precisely the same way in which I offer it to Jordan, it won't work. And the same holds true for Kristen and Bethany. Love is not a recipe...it cannot be reduced to a law, a code or a formula. And the bottom line is this.

It is not only the love of God that comes *to* us (as the old hymn reminds us) new every morning. It's the ever shifting, always changing challenge *to* love that arrives newly minted with the dawn of each and every new day. Inviting us to practice love...and in the process of practicing, giving us the opportunity (day in and day out) truly to discover...in this time of freedom...to discover with the coming of each new day, just what love really and truly means. Not a formula! Not a recipe. But something much much better. An adventure. An adventure of discovery!

May God grant us the courage...and the freedom...to live that adventure...the adventure of love...this day...every day. In the name, and in the Spirit, of the living Christ. Amen!

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