

“A Vegetarian Taxpayer”
Matthew 17:24-27/1 Corinthians 8:1-13

“Freedom isn’t free! Freedom isn’t free! You’ve got to pay a price, you’ve got to sacrifice for your liberty.” I was part of a school assembly in 6th grade when we sang that song. It came from a group called “Up With People.” Their website describes the organization as one that “stages song and dance performances promoting themes such as multiculturalism, racial equality, and positive thinking.” I wouldn’t have been aware of those larger goals in 1970 nor would there have been something known as a website to fill me in, but I do recall a few of the lyrics.

The song continues: “There was a gen’ral by the name of George, with a small band of men at Valley Forge. Left the comfort of home for the cold and ice, they won independence ‘cause they paid the price.” After that and each verse, we then sang “Freedom isn’t free! Freedom isn’t free! You’ve got to pay a price, you’ve got to sacrifice for your liberty.”

Keep that refrain in mind as we turn to the Biblical passages before us this morning for in both there are themes of freedom and sacrifice as well. Neither talks about such attributes in regards to political freedoms, but they do affirm, as Christians, too, that “freedom isn’t free.”

Our gospel reading tells of a day Jesus and his disciples have returned to Capernaum, that village on the Sea of Galilee shoreline that served as their base of operations. A tax collector walks up to Peter and asks the disciple, “Does your teacher not pay the temple tax?” The very way the question is phrased hints to a larger conversation at work in those days. During the first century, the issue of whether or not Jews should pay the tax to support the Temple in Jerusalem was hotly debated. Some groups within Judaism thought every male age 20 or older was obligated to pay an annual assessment. Others said it was a voluntary gift and still others argued it was a one-time requirement only. In response to the question, Peter says Jesus does pay it.

When he got home and shared that conversation with Jesus a moment of instruction began. “What do you think Simon?” he asks “From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their children or from others?” The disciple answers “From others,” and Jesus replies, “Then the children are free,” meaning that God, their one true sovereign, did not require payment of the tax. Had Jesus stopped there, Peter might have gone back to his questioner to say “I misspoke the other day,” but his teacher continues. “However, so that we do not give offense to them,” and then offers the creative image of someone catching a fish with a coin in its mouth. “Take that,” he concludes “and give it to them for you and me.”

Our reading from First Corinthians does not talk about taxes, but about another question debated by believers. As background, it’s helpful to know that Corinth was a crossroads in the ancient world where all kinds of religions were observed. As part of pagan worship, there were often sacrifices of meat offered to the gods. Some of the flesh was burned on an altar, some of the leftovers were used for private celebrations afterwards, and what remained was sold to the public. For first-century Christians, the question arose of whether they should risk offending a host who served such meat by declining to eat it or offend fellow believers who didn’t grasp why they would buy and eat such food. In characteristic fashion, Paul faces the issue directly.

“Now concerning food sacrificed to idols,” he begins, and then quotes some truism of the day that “all of us possess knowledge.” He goes on: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up,” and points out that many believers understood all other gods were false deities and thus eating such meat was no problem. “It is not everyone, however,” Paul continues “who has this knowledge...[so]take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.” He explains that eating it could hurt the faith of others and ends “Therefore, if food

is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.”

Jesus said his followers were exempt from the Temple tax, but should pay it anyway. Paul told his audience they were free to eat such meat, but should not do so. Together, they called for believers to be vegetarian taxpayers. A song from my childhood puts it differently: “Freedom isn’t free...you’ve got to pay a price, you’ve got to sacrifice for your liberty.”

Now certainly the paying of taxes and eating of meat are not issues before most Christian bodies of faith today. To be sure, we all like to minimize how much of our money goes to any governmental body and there is all kind of good advice about healthy diets, too, but such themes are not often debated in churches of the 21st century. Thus, I struggled at first to think of a comparable issue for today, until it occurred to me that in both moments of instruction from the past called upon believers to use their freedom in a particular way.

In regards to that tax, Jesus said, “the children are free” from it, but added “However, so that we do not give offense” and ultimately told them to pay it. Paul spoke to how the mature Christian could confidently eat such meat, but shouldn’t do it because of the impact on others. Together those words proclaim that while we have many freedoms as disciples of Jesus Christ, we are always to use them in ways that build up which means there will be times when we are to sacrifice our freedoms to help strengthen the faith of others.

One of the ways that dynamic is tested occurs when a Christian has no doubt about their convictions on a particular issue and feels compelled to convince others that they are right. I have always encouraged a different approach where one can be confident in her/his beliefs, but still respectful of fellow Christians who read the same Bible and draw different conclusions. That pattern is one of restrained freedom. As we know, all believers do not choose such a path.

Like many of you, I have tired of the revelations offered by Prince Harry about his life in the palace. With the Netflix series, frequent interviews, and the just-published autobiography there has been a kind of unintended irony between all that he has shared and his deep frustration over an invasion of privacy by the press. Given all that he has said it’s hard for me to imagine any reconciliation happening with his father and brother in the foreseeable future, too.

A few days ago, I saw an article that spoke of one piece from the book that talks about Harry’s faith. In it, the prince describes himself today as “spiritual, but not religious,” a contrast to the model of his grandmother whose own Christian faith shaped her constitutional duty as queen or that of King Charles III who is supreme governor of the Church of England. Harry often attended services as a boy, but it all changed after the tragic death of his mother.

“Harry was 12 when [Princess Diana] died in a car crash in Paris,” writes Dominic Green. “The Christian rites at her funeral in Westminster Abbey couldn’t console him. His only regular contact with the Bible came when a teacher, punishing teenage misdemeanors, delivered [what Harry describes as] ‘a tremendous clout, always with a copy of the New English Bible.’ This, Harry writes, ‘made me feel bad about myself, bad about the teacher, and bad about the Bible.’” (Green, Dominic “Prince Harry’s Pagan Process,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 1/20/23).

That unnamed teacher was not the last believer who used his knowledge in that kind of way. That same thing happens in families, congregations, and denominations when certainty about knowledge becomes as a point of division. That’s sad to me whenever it occurs and seems so contrary to what Jesus and Paul taught as they urged us to realize that even with our freedom there are times we are called to sacrifice.

Shortly after World War II, the World Council of Churches wanted to see how its money was being used for re-building efforts in Europe. It sent John Mackie, president of the Church of Scotland and two ministers from “a rather severe and pietistic denomination,” to travel by jeep

and visit some of the villages where funds were being disbursed.

“One afternoon Dr. Mackie and the other two clergymen went to call on the Orthodox priest in a small Greek village. The priest was overjoyed to see them, and was eager to pay his respects. Immediately, he produced a box of Havana cigars, a great treasure in those days, and offered each of his guests a cigar. Dr. Mackie took one, bit the end off, lit it, puffed a few puffs, and said how good it was. The other two gentlemen looked horrified and said, ‘No, thank you, we don’t smoke.’ Realizing that somehow he had offended the two who refused, the priest was anxious to make amends. So he excused himself and reappeared in a few minutes with a flagon of his choicest wine. Dr. Mackie took a glassful, sniffed it like a connoisseur, sipped it and praised its quality. Soon he asked for another glass. His companions, however, drew themselves back even more noticeably than before and said, “’No, thank you, we don’t drink!’”

“Later when the three men were in the jeep again, making their way up the rough road out of the village, the two pious clergymen turned upon Dr. Mackie with a vengeance. ‘Dr. Mackie,’ they insisted, ‘do you mean to tell us that you are the president of the Church of Scotland and an officer of the World Council of Churches and you smoke and drink?’ Dr. Mackie had had all he could take, and his temper got the better of him, “’No...I don’t,’ he said, ‘but somebody had to be a Christian!’” (As told by Donald McCullough, in *The Trivialization of God: the Dangerous Illusion of a Manageable Deity*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995, 36-37).

“Freedom isn’t free,” a song proclaimed and the founder of and apologist for our faith concurred. Which is why they called upon believers in the first century and now us to always use our freedom in ways that always build up. An approach that will include times when we give up something for the benefit of others, but a path we choose with grateful hearts even so because we serve that One who paid the price and made the ultimate sacrifice for our liberty.