

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

June 30, 2019  
The Third Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 8:26-39  
Isaiah 65:1-9  
Psalm 22:19-28  
Galatians 3:23-29

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My 10<sup>th</sup> grade trigonometry teacher was a lady named Mrs. Payne. Most of us thought the name quite appropriate. Mrs. Payne was a tall, intimidating woman with a harsh, disapproving gaze. She was tough...very tough.

Mrs. Payne never used the chalk board. She preferred what at the time was cutting edge technology...the overhead projector. She had sheet upon sheet of those clear pages where she would prepare each day's lesson with equations written with a blue marker. (That's an important detail). As she would teach, she would often write a wrong answer to see if we caught the error. And then, I will never forget the image...she would lick her thumb, swipe it over the incorrect answer and then write the correct answer in its place.

The result of time and time again licking her thumb, erasing equations and rewriting answers was a rather bright blue tongue. I am not sure how much ink Mrs. Payne ingested over the years. It had to have been a lot. But her methods worked. I quickly learned there was always one correct answer to the equation. It took a lot of effort to get there but with consistent practice, it got easier to figure things out. And, of course, the fear of Mrs. Payne and her blue tongue made your desire to get it right, all the more urgent.

Equations. Remembering Mrs. Payne reminded me how nice it is to have a solution...a correct solution, a clear right and wrong. I also thought how hard it is to get it right if you struggle to understand the basic concepts behind the equation. Without understanding, it's virtually impossible to figure out the answer.

Today, I want us to think about equations and how to solve them. Not in the mathematical sense but in the moral sense. How do we "get it right?" And...who decides what moral compass to use? Could you get different solutions based upon the factors you input? Or, is there truly only one right answer?

Let's take a closer look at two of our readings this morning to help us consider different variables to our moral equations. We'll use three statements to guide us. From Luke and Galatians...

"Follow me."

"For freedom Christ has set us free."

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Using these statements, we will build our equation with the concepts follow, freedom, and love. One might argue that these are the greatest concepts of our faith in Jesus Christ. If we follow, we will find freedom, which will ultimately result in the ability to love. In fact, that might be the most concise explanation of the Christian faith ever written. Follow + freedom = love.

But, I am no mathematician and the dilemma arises that equations are typically concrete, provable facts and figures that help us solve a problem. You come to the equation with factors and you come out with a solution...the right solution. However, life isn't always that clear. Our morality isn't mathematical.

For instance, we might be able to all agree what it means to follow. That's a commitment to a cause or in this case a commitment to our faith. We have come to know and trust in Jesus and therefore, have a strong desire to believe what Christianity teaches. That seems pretty cut and dry. Jesus was clear in Luke – follow me. And...you either want to follow or you don't. The text doesn't imply how well we follow or how often we may fail or succeed in following. It just indicates that we should desire to follow and that we should be committed to doing so.

But, freedom...that gets a little trickier. Galatians says, "For freedom Christ has set us free." It goes on to say, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence..."

Freedom as defined in the dictionary is, "*the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint.*" That's certainly one answer. Taken in this way one might argue that you should be able to do what you want, when you want. However, when we look at our actions from a moral lens we know that our freedom is always in tension with the freedom of others. You might say, even though we can, doesn't mean we should. That's what Paul meant when he said do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.

So, how do we come up with the correct application of freedom in our equation? Well, in any good algebraic equation, you are often given the answer first so that you can figure out the missing variable within the equation. In our case, the answer we are given is love. Or as Bishop Curry is so fond of saying, if it's not about love, it's not about God.

Paul in writing to the church in Galatia gives us guidance on what this kind of love means. Not only does Galatians tell us to love your neighbor as yourself, it provides a few guidelines as to how this might look. First, Galatians tells us what love is not. It's not things like strife, jealousy, anger, or fighting. Love is, however, built upon what Galatians calls the fruits of the spirit where love is accompanied by things like joy, peace, patience kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Therefore, you might have the freedom to act in anger or jealousy. You might have the freedom to instigate arguments and fuel distrust. You might have the freedom to spread

gossip or hate. You might have the freedom to exclude, put down, or judge. Those are certainly available to you. But if you apply love to your understanding of freedom then those actions don't create a balanced equation.

Instead, Christ has set us free so that our freedom is used for the good of one another, not against one another.

David Brooks, in his book *The Second Mountain*, to me describes our correct application of freedom this way...

*"Every once in a while, I meet a person who radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for the large ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors in judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They've made unshakable commitments to family, a cause, a community, or a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive a deep satisfaction from doing what they have been called to do. Life isn't easy for these people. They've taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good."*

Follow + Freedom = Love.

That's the equation. Thank goodness for the answer.

Amen.