

Over time, a new home experiences change, which can take away from what was intended as faucets leak, carpet is no longer as stylish, or countertops and appliances need updating. Other changes can add usefulness. Time brings the need to deal with such changes. Families, marriages, and congregations all struggle with similar realities. Much time is needed for special attention, repair, reshaping, updating, or reforming.

In the beginning, God created a perfect world so people would be free to reach out in love to one another. Instead, all are trapped or poisoned by the lies of the serpent, as we believe we deserve to be like God. In doing so we continue to destroy our relationships with God and each other. What God intended is no longer how we live.

No matter our age, background, vocation, or interests, we all get used to patterns and routines, and when they are threatened or changed, we panic. We assumed life was under control until a Coronavirus appeared and Putin began his brutal war against his neighbors. Such chaos caused everyone to readjust to a new normal.

We get so used to what we get used to and soon we don't ask questions or forget what the real truth of our life is all about. Traditions, routines, and our selfish nature often wall us off from God as we assume we have the all the answers or trust only the answers that seem to serve us best. Even well intended attempts to explain God can have unplanned results.

For instance, the Church once taught we are so sinful, we must make up for mistakes to ensure the guarantee of forgiveness and heaven. The result was guilt-laden penance, and actions proving we were sorry for sin. Some popes taught at death, one must first spent time in a place called purgatory, before being worthy to enter heaven. Saints were assumed to be holier than normal folk and intermediaries to ensure prayers really got to God. Rather than Calvary being a once for all gift, it was even taught that every time communion was celebrated, Christ was sacrificed again, despite no scriptural basis for any of these teachings that crept in.

The Reformation is no big deal to those outside of the Church, but for us is a reminder of what is most important and how easy it is to let tradition and lack of attention to draw us away from what the truth is.

Our worship and prayer habits often become ingrained with little thought or concern about their purpose or power. Just as with daily life, tradition, comfort, and selfishness often trap us in places and ways we never we never imagined get us into trouble. The price of our need to control faith and life is that often the freedom of the Gospel winds up being silenced!

Rather than sending lightning bolts to punish, God chose to reform creation by coming in the flesh. He shared such grace through the miracle of Christmas and Easter! He proclaimed true freedom is found in love. True worship is found in serving God and neighbor.

As Martin Luther actually read scripture, he discovered faith in Christ alone, rather than our actions, brings us into a right relationship with God. Christ's sacrificial life and death is a gift of grace, from a loving God who is disappointed (not angry.) For Luther this served to help him as if cataracts had been removed from his eyes.

We live in a culture seeing freedom as a right to get whatever I want, choose, or demand! Freedom is never free, there is always a cost to achieve it. People died to free slaves. Taxes by some provide healthcare and food for others. Parents surrender much for children to grow to make adult choices. Jesus died on a cross that we might be set free from the prison of death! But the freedom brought by faith is God's gift alone. There is nothing we can do to earn, deserve, or achieve it. That is why it is called grace!

Any church, nation, politician, pastor, or people who believe they have all the answers can forget the most important answer – which is only God can pay the price to set us free. As I study scripture, God plants the seeds of his love. When I take quiet time for prayer, God gently nudges me with his guidance. And when honest about my shortcomings and celebrate God's grace, then (and only then) am I truly free. It is only in my surrender that the price Jesus has paid becomes the grace which sets us free.

Over time, we all know how easy it is to slip and slide into traditions and practices that might seem to have a purpose but gradually lead us away from where we need to be. Today we remember a time when the Church, as it reclaimed the freedom it had lost when too much time was spent trying to reframe, restructure, or recast the simple message of the Gospel.

A popular fable suggests if a frog is dropped in a kettle of hot water, it will immediately jump out. But if placed in cold water which is gradually raised to boiling, the frog won't notice the gradual temperature rise and will boil rather than jump to freedom. And so it is that we become so used to what we are used to, we often are blind to real truth. Traditions, routines, and habits become so ingrained we often miss beneficial changes because we are so used to what we are used to.

There are so many examples of where we are trapped, where we have wandered off course, and where we are free. Unfortunately, many get confused about which is which. How easily we become like frogs trapped in a kettle with heat slowly rising and a lack of awareness of the danger our comfortableness might bring.

There was a father who took his son to the beach to fly a kite. It was a windy day and the father had to hold tightly to the string. As the wind blew harder and he let out more string, the kite flew higher and higher. Then there was a sickening "snap!" The string had broken. The kite was "free," but it was no longer flying higher and fell quickly to the ground. What kept the kite flying was the restraint of the string. When that was lost the kite was free but couldn't fly.

We are never truly free until we are restrained by something that pulls us higher and higher. It is not the absence of restraints that makes us free, but the tension of being tied to Christ and the sacrificial gift of his love. True freedom is not the absence of rules or relationships but JOY in a relationship! Every other form of freedom is temporary and an illusion.

Only as Christ ties himself to us are we finally and forever free. And when we are free in Christ, our living is worthy of the worship, praise, and daily servant love that has the same breath and powerful love as of God. And then, not by anything we have earned or achieved we are able to live guided by the refrain of a powerful hymn, "Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last!"