**“Called to Freedom”** Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones  
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time The House of Hope Presbyterian Church Galatians 5:1, 13-25 Saint Paul, Minnesota  
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One of the ancient Christian ideas that deeply shapes my theology, ministry, and preaching is a quote from the church father Irenaeus—“The glory of God is a humanity fully alive.”

I believe, quite foundationally, that God desires us to flourish. To live a good and abundant life, fully of enjoyment.

What is a good and abundant human life?

There, are of course, many ways to answer that question and, as a philosopher and a pastor, I’ve read and been influenced by a wide range of thinkers on the topic from Aristotle to Wendell Berry, Martha Nussbaum, and David Brooks.

My favorite recent book on the topic was by the sociology professor Amanda Udis-Kessler entitled *Abundant Lives: A Progressive Christian Ethic of Flourishing.* Her definition of flourishing is the cover quote of today’s bulletin:

People flourish when we are encouraged and enabled to be and to become our whole best selves, to fulfill our potential, to contribute effectively to the well-being of others and to society more broadly, and to live joyful, meaningful lives that make a difference and leave a legacy.

That sounds pretty wonderful, I think. Wouldn’t you enjoy a life described that way?

Speaking of legacy. This week it was good to learn about both Joan Frank and Bob McKinnell who died last Saturday. Joan’s family have been members of this congregation since the 19th century, so talk about a legacy. I heard all about the various groups she had participated in at the church and the friendships she and Bill made.

I also heard about Bob McKinnell’s significant contributions to cancer research and his long involvement in our Bible study where he asked good questions.

Preparing funerals is one of the most sacred obligations of the pastorate. And one of the true blessings as well, because we get to learn about people and their stories and bring honor to the lives that they’ve led.

It sounds like both Joan and Bob lived good lives that made a difference.

Udis-Kessler’s ethic flows pretty naturally from her definition of flourishing. Good ideas and decisions are those that promote this sort of life. Bad ideas and decisions are those that get in the way of living this life. She’s most critical of avoidable suffering. And so we ought to do what we can to alleviate all forms of avoidable suffering.

Udis-Kessler then goes on to describe a series of attributes that are part of our common humanity. And for each attribute what it means to suffer, and what it means to flourish, and how we promote our own and others well-being.

These traits of our common humanity include—our embodiment, the emotions, being dependent upon relationships, making meaning, learning and growing, being creative, and being spiritual.

Here are some examples of how she treats these common human traits. Here’s how she describes flourishing as embodied beings:

We flourish when we use our bodies for empowerment, accomplishment, and delight in work, play, [and] creativity. We flourish when we experience ‘pleasure, joy, and at home-ness in our bodies.’

And this is how she describes what it means to suffer as meaning makers:

We suffer when experiences of personal trauma, social chaos, or violence lead us to feel that our lives do not make sense (or that they only make sense in disempowering or fear-inducing ways). We suffer when we are not permitted to tell our story or when no one is willing to listen to our story and take it seriously (as so often happens to members of devalued groups).

This is a helpful, contemporary framework through which to view the human condition, our ethical commitments, and our Christian values.

Saint Paul’s discussion here in Galatians 5 is also his attempt to describe the good Christian life as he sees it. That life exhibits the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And a good life avoids the vices. Paul in this passage sounds like a rather typical Roman moral theorist.

But what is uniquely interesting is his framing all of this within in the concept of freedom. According to Paul, through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been set free, and once set free can now live this good life.

And so Paul admonishes us not to let anyone or anything, including ourselves, rob us of our freedom.

It’s a stirring message. Of course we moderns hear this celebration of freedom a little differently than Paul originally meant it. We live two and a half centuries into the modern world when freedom became one of the paradigm human values. We liberal, Mainline Protestants, in particular, value freedom as essential to our vision of the good life. And we think of that freedom in the religious, political, and personal spheres, a quite broad value that touches all aspects of our lives.

Amanda Udis-Kessler does include freedom in her description of what makes a good human life, but she uses a different term—agency. To flourish we must be able to be agents of our own lives, the ability to make decisions and for them to have efficacy. Including the ability to have an impact on the world around us. If we don’t have control over at least some aspects of our lives, we cannot thrive. We need to be able to set goals and pursue them. She writes that we suffer “when we are unable to act on our desires because our autonomy is denied, safety is unavailable, or we do not have access to the resources we need to act.”

Which has implications politically and economically, for one cannot be an agent of their lives if their rights are denied or they lack basic financial resources.

I appreciate her embedding the value of freedom within a richer understanding of what it means to have agency. Our ability to actually bring some of our goals to fruition is essential.

Of course this passage in Galatians is one of the key texts in our Christian understanding of religious liberty. We Protestants came to believe that no external power ought to be able to compel us to believe or think any certain way, especially in matters of conscience, including our religious faith.

In the last decade and a half, I’ve been disturbed by a new trend in discussions of religious liberty. That is people using their religion as an excuse to be intolerant and then justifying that as their “religious freedom,” a right they are entitled to.

Essential to the American tradition of religious liberty is the idea of a public space in which everyone's views are allowed to interact. For this public space to exist, everyone must be granted equality and mutual respect. It does not mean that you have to agree with everyone else, quite the contrary. It means that in the public sphere you cannot try to impose your views on someone else. Instead, you must grant them the respect and the equality that is their fundamental human right. You must acknowledge their dignity, their conscience. Or, as St. Paul put it in the letter to the Galatians, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

In the public sphere no one has a religious right to discriminate against another human being. Discrimination, not treating another person with the respect that they are entitled to, refusing equal treatment—these things are direct contradictions of religious liberty. They are hostile to it.

It is brazen dishonesty to wrap your biases in the language of religious freedom. It risks substantial harm to the Republic. To the entire American democratic experiment. And even to the Christian gospel.

It is Orwellian to use a term to describe its exact opposite. This dishonesty must be resisted.

Religious liberty, as historically understood, as rooted in the biblical tradition, as enshrined in our Constitution, demands equality of all persons, demands mutual respect of all persons, demands that in the public sphere everyone be treated the same.

And, like I indicated already, that’s because our Christian idea of freedom is actually rooted in our concept of love of neighbor. In his commentary on this Galatians passage, John Calvin wrote, “He who loves will render to every man his right, will do injury or harm to no man, will do good, as far as lies in his power, to all.”

Paul believes that Jesus set us free to live a life of love. That is how we become the person God dreams we might be. And how we create a world where everyone can flourish.

In her book on abundant living, Amanda Udis-Kessler roots our flourishing in this Christian love ethic. She writes, “I define love as the work we do to flourish in all aspects of our lives and to help all other people flourish in all aspects of their lives.”

What it means to love someone is to do what we can to help them flourish, to live the best life they can live. This is not rocket science, people. So why do we humans make it so hard?

Udis-Kessler discusses the work we need to do in order achieve these goals.

First is the individual work we need to do. We have to cultivate the virtues, such as humility, compassion, courage, and generosity. Not exactly the same list as Paul’s fruits of the Spirit, but a similar sort of idea.

We also must do the work to heal and grow. One thing I appreciate about her analysis is that she also identifies the need for each of us to engage in spiritual formation and psychological healing in order to become more “resilient, flexible, and open-hearted.” And not just because such efforts contribute to our own well-being, but because our personal healing also benefits others. I think of my friends who refuse to date anyone who hasn’t ever been to therapy.

Beyond the individual work, we must engage in collective efforts to bring about greater well-being for everyone. She writes, “Whatever else progressive Christianity is, it ought to be a social change movement for human and planetary flourishing.” Keep that in mind as we make decisions at House of Hope.

Udis-Kessler says that our political efforts for justice are involved in pursuing flourishing, but so also is our work to create and sustain congregations, specifically congregations that can be places of healing, growth, and thriving.

For our troubled times, we aspire to be a community where people feel that they belong and are cared for. Where they are inspired and can make sense of themselves and their world. Where they are part of something bigger that helps them to achieve epic goals. We want to build an institution that is resilient, carrying our values and dreams far into the future, so that God’s good news is shared long after we are gone.

Doing this individual and collective work is what it means to love one another and live the life that God intends for us. This is how the Spirit invites us to use our freedom.

So, the task of ensuring a good life for ourselves and others begins with overcoming selfishness *and* our human tendency to exclude those who are different from ourselves. It then manifests in kindness and hospitality, and is guided by humility and generosity. For the good human life is rooted in the commandment "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul teaches us that the life we desire is made possible because of the freedom we have in Jesus Christ. We are set free to flourish.

And Irenaeus proclaims that the glory of God is a humanity fully alive.

Celebrate the good news--God has called us to lives of freedom and joy.