

Can We Be Free and Destined at the Same Time?
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 15:12-17

“In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplished all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.”

“Who are we, really?” asks the narrator of Geraldine Brook’s novel *Caleb’s Crossing*.

“Are our souls shaped, our fates written in full by God, before we draw our first breath? Do we make ourselves, by the choices we our selves make? Or are we clay merely, that is molded and pushed into the shape that our betters propose for us?” This is a very complicated and quite loaded question you have asked on Reformation Sunday. As those who once were best known at the table of ecumenism for loving God with our minds, the question will require us to reason our way through a thicket of ideas—free will and determinism, fate and destiny, choice and election—if our faith is to be given the understanding it seeks.

At the outset it must be said that we owe the content of our thinking about freedom and destiny much more to our politics than our piety. From the standpoint of our common life, we allow freedom to be defined by the nation-state, the market and the media even as we allow our understanding of destiny to be defined by biological necessity or evolutionary determinism. From the perspective of faith, however, we confess that we neither possess freedom as individuals nor do we have free will “in us” from birth, like Intel installed in a computer to set our minds “searching, searching, searching” for the right path. Moreover we need to be clear that when a free life is thought to be a life with the least number of restrictions placed on the choices before us by others, we would do well as Calvin’s heirs to think again. This may be freedom in the context of capitalism or consumerism, but it is the opposite of the freedom for which we were made according to Scripture. Unfortunately the voice of religion in matters of freedom and

destiny is usually relegated to a shallow caricature of the doctrine of predestination that would make Calvin turn over in his grave, except that the grave is neither his destiny nor ours!

So perhaps the place to start this morning is with our freedom to choose. “Do we make ourselves by the choices we our selves make?” Our friend Robert Jenson says that we are those creatures of God who have “our own true selves not as possessions but as challenges.” Our humanity is “something that happens, and happens exactly as the event of choice and action in which I become something that I was not before.” We *are* free to choose, he says.

But then he goes on to say that this freedom is circumscribed: we cannot make ourselves by ourselves. If our humanity is to happen, it happens in community. Being human is a “joint enterprise rather than a [singular] condition.” I need you in order to become the human being I may choose to be in response to you. My humanity is dependent upon you and your humanity is dependent upon me. “You intrude into my life, as someone different from me” and so bring the possibility with you that I may be different in the future because of you. “It is within this possibility that freedom opens” says Jenson. “Should I love this person suddenly there for me? Should I take up the task unexpectedly offered by this comparative stranger? For which of those importunate candidates should I vote?” There is a sense in which we are seized, carried off into an unknown and even an unforeseeable future by the possibility of choice that is before us in the other.

But here is the rub. Does being free consist in the fact that we can make real choices or does being free have to do with the choices we make, in each instance, to be or not to be a human being? Think of something in your life that, when presented to you, you did because you could; but when the thing was done, when the so-called freedom was seized, it instead seized you and left you diminished, less of a person than you might have been had you chosen otherwise. A

word said, a deal made, a reckless risk taken, a brave risk not taken, a small betrayal, a selfish decision, a hidden infidelity, a mean-spirited retort. In each case, you could say that you were free to choose an action or a response to the other and yet, unless you are a socio-path, you knew yourself afterward to be enslaved by the choice you made. It is also within this possibility of choice that freedom closes.

So our freedom lies not in the choosing but in the choice made. And from the beginning in the garden until now, we seem to choose unfreedom; we choose a sort of slavish life of selfish license, personally and corporately, that used to be called sin before it was diagnosed as something curable by therapy and drugs or lauded politically as the way out of a recession. “As a sinner,” wrote the old theologians, “man has decided against his freedom to be genuinely man.” Translated to include us all, as sinners we decide against our freedom to be genuinely human. And in this decision we will necessarily continue to decide against our freedom. “Very truly I tell you,” said Jesus in John’s gospel, “everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin.” “In this briefest of biblical formulations,” say the old theologians, “we have the whole doctrine of the bondage of the will.”

“Can we be free?” you ask now from a completely different vantage point. And here is the ironic twist in your question, a question that once seemed to oppose freedom and destiny: you and I are free *because* we were destined according to the will of God, “chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” The choosing at issue in our freedom and the freedom at issue in our choosing is not ours but God’s.

God in freedom has chosen not to be God without us and this choice has set in the human soul a “*longing for someone*, for the God of Israel,” says Jens. God is our destiny. “All talk and practice of freedom is part of that restlessness with which the human heart is blessed and

afflicted, because [our hearts are] made for God and short of the Kingdom [are] not yet at home in him.” So the one who was sent into a far country, who emptied himself and took on the form of a slave, who was born in human likeness and became obedient unto death, he comes to us to reveal what it looks like to be free and destined at the same time: he reveals what it looks like to be human, at the same time, that he is our home, our destiny, the God for whom we long. But being the prodigals that we are, we think our freedom lies in taking our leave from him until suddenly we wake in the pig sty that has become our lives, having chosen unfreedom, with no idea how to find our way home without him.

“Who are we really? Are our souls shaped, our fates [read: our destinies] written in full by God, before we draw our first breath?” Scripture says a resounding and grateful “Yes!” to this question because, no matter the twists and turns, the detours and dead ends that will comprise our mortal existence, our destination is the love and the freedom that is God. Does this mean that every detail of our doing and deciding is plotted out and we are simply pawns going through the motion of choosing to be or not to be human in every moment? Not exactly! But here is where the going gets rough as we wrestle with this most important big question.

If God is our destiny, how does God bring us home? I want to come at your question now from our destiny as it does business with our freedom. Say that we are players in a plot of God’s devising who are generally unconscious of this fact. How do we play our part in relation to the story-line? According to Avivah Zornberg, God achieves his purposes (brings us home) “through...apparent freedoms—freedom to love, to hate, to kill, to sell into slavery (she has in mind the story of Joseph and his brothers.)...[Yet] it is the very nature of life inside a plot that one does not understand the whole structure....God is the omniscient, skillful Narrator, whose plot rests, apparently without artifice, on the plausible motivations of His characters....God not

only fulfills His own intentions through the agency of human beings; He also makes them feel, through his plot-stratagems, fully responsible.”

But, she says, there comes a time when we are on to God, when the question of God’s relationship to our autonomy is up, leading us to ask if we can be free and destined at the same time; inviting us to wonder petulantly, “Are we clay merely, that is molded and pushed into the shape that our betters propose for us?” And if we are, why must we be put through pain and struggle, through betrayal and anguish and agony to travel to the place where we inevitably will arrive? To date myself, I guess I am asking why we cannot read the Cliff Notes rather than having to slog through all 592 pages including those interminable chapters on whales! Because, says Zornberg, “When God comes to deal with significant, complex people,...their substantiality demands a different approach. God’s plot is not set aside, but is molded to the shape of their personalities, of their uniqueness.” You may remember at the end of this longest of narratives about Joseph and his brothers, Joseph calms his brothers’ fears that he will take revenge on them for their betrayal of him by saying, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...” To what we think is the plot of our lives unfolding by the necessity of what seems to us our human choices and freedom, God enacts a counter-narrative that eternally intends our good. We are all headed home, but God only knows when and how we will arrive in the everlasting arms.

In the meantime, what difference does any of this make in how our humanity happens as the event of choice and action in which we become something we were not before, in which I become someone I could not be without you. I think the difference has to do with acknowledging God’s hand in the happening of our humanity and the difference might go

something like this: “When you encounter another person,” says John Ames in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*,

when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you. So you must think, What is the Lord asking of me in this moment, in this situation? If you confront insult or antagonism, your first impulse will be to respond in kind. But if you think, as it were, This is an emissary sent from the Lord, and some benefit is intended for me, first of all the occasion to demonstrate my faithfulness, the chance to show that I do in some small degree participate in the grace that saved me, you are free to act otherwise than as circumstances would seem to dictate. You are free to act by your own lights. You are freed at the same time of the impulse to hate or resent that person. He would probably laugh at the thought that the Lord sent him to you for your benefit (and his), but that is the perfection of the disguise, his own ignorance of it.

“You did not choose me, but I chose you” says Jesus. “You are no longer slaves, but you are my friends.” What is he asking of you in this moment? “Love one another as I have loved you.” This is our freedom; this is our destiny. Thanks be to God.