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Sermon for January 29, 2012

**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Year B**

*Scripture Text: I Corinthians 9:1-15*

### *A Model of Freedom*

For the next several weeks we are going to be looking at an extended digression that Paul has inserted into this letter to the Corinthian Communities of faith. This section of Paul's letter, which extends from the beginning of chapter 9 through the middle of chapter 10, is considered a digression because it moves away from the central issues of Paul's letter so that he might provide an amplified model of what he has been talking about when he challenges the members of the Corinthian house churches to consider what it means to claim to be free in Christ.

As you will recall from last week, the primary issue was and continues to be what it means to be free in Christ, what this freedom that is being claimed by the Corinthian Christians is all about. While Paul does not disagree with the members of the Corinthian communities of faith that they are free in Christ, that they have been freed from a life held captive to sin; he does none-the-less continue to remind them that this freedom they claim is not an unlimited license to do anything they want any time they want but, is rather, a higher obligation to act in such a way that will build up all in the community of faith and will therefore model for all, inside and outside the community of faith, what it means to proclaim Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

Now the first portion of this digression that we will look at today can be broken down into two distinct parts. The first part, verses one and two, is a series of rapid fire rhetorical questions that Paul asks of the Corinthian Christians as a way to set up what follows. The purpose of all of these questions phrased in such a way to elicit a positive response is to make it possible for Paul to offer to the Corinthian Christians what he considers to be an appropriate model of one who is free in Christ – himself. So, imagining that he and the Corinthian communities of faith are engaged in a face to face conversation instead of being separated by time and distance, Paul in a dizzying display of questioning fires off six questions all demanding a response of yes.

“I [like you] am free [in Christ] right?

I am an apostle, right?

I have seen the risen Christ, right?

You [the Corinthian communities of faith] are a product of the work I have done as an apostle, right?

So even if I am not an apostle to others, I am an Apostle to you, right?

So you are the seal of confirmation that I am an apostle, right?"

By asking all of these rhetorical questions, Paul builds his case that he, like the Corinthian Christians, is free in Christ and so he, like they, has every right to claim the same freedoms that they claim and that have been made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Christ. But more than simply claiming the same rights that they claim, Paul proclaims to them that by the very virtue that he is an apostle, one who has seen Christ, his rights of freedom exceed even theirs.

Using the word *exousia*, translated in English as freedom but that also carries the meanings of power, ability or right, Paul sets the stage to show the Corinthian Christians that for every freedom or right they claim, Paul can not only claim the very same right or freedom, he can also claim to have exponentially more freedom and rights and to have had them longer because he is not only an apostle he is their apostle – the very reason that they exist as a community of faith in the first place.

So now that he has firmly and decisively set the foundation upon which he stands, Paul now launches into a mock defense. While there is no evidence that he or his authority has been challenged by any in the Corinthian communities of faith, Paul lays out for them and for all an argument about himself and how he acts, as if he were being charged with some infraction in a court of law. Building upon the arguments that he has received from the Corinthian Christians, Paul asks of them the very same questions they ask of him.

Am I not entitled to eat and drink what I want?

Am I not entitled, If I so choose, to marry just like any of the other apostles?

Do not I like anyone else have the right to make a living as an apostle?

Over and over again he peppers the Corinthian Christians with questions that they can do nothing else but positively respond that he not only has each of these rights as an apostle; he in fact has rights that far exceed anything they can claim or even imagine.

But to what end?

“Nevertheless, I have not made use of any of these freedoms or rights, but will endure anything lest we obscure or become an obstacle to the gospel of Christ.” (I Cor. 9:12b)

In this single sentence, Paul, has not only proclaimed how he will act, he has also invited all who will claim to be followers of Christ to do the same and he has, quite subtly but none-the-less firmly, proclaimed that faith in Christ is not simply an academic assent to a set of principles but is rather active participation in the loving and caring relationships that all who claim to be Christian are called to engage in.

Using the verb *stego*, what we have translated as will endure, but that also carries the meanings of bear with, keep to oneself, or even to throw a cloak of silence over – a verb that he does not use again until the thirteenth chapter of this letter when he writes, “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things...” (I Cor. 13:7) – Paul sets into motion once again the idea, that it is not about what rights or privileges or freedoms one has or can claim that is relevant; it is how one employs those rights to build up the community of faith and to proclaim the gospel of Christ.

Using himself as the model for others to follow, Paul makes it clear that *it is not about what one can claim; it is about how one lives*. Foreshadowing what he will write later on, Paul once again calls the Christians in Corinth to live out their faith not by going around boasting about all of the freedom they have gained by becoming Christian or by puffing up themselves by proclaiming all of the knowledge they have, but rather, by building up all in the community of faith by loving one another in such a way that they proclaim to all in the community and all outside the community that the most important thing any person can hope to understand is that they are a child of God.

Yes, Paul states, we who claim to be followers of Christ are all free because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

Yes, because of that freedom we do have rights and privileges to claim as members of the household of God.

But sometimes, the most faithful thing to do, the most loving thing to do is to forgo exercising those rights so that our actions, our lives never become a stumbling block to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus the Christ or worse yet harmful to another of God’s children.

Amen.

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