



BROKEN SIGNPOSTS

Sermon-based Guide
for Reflection and Discussion

Week of October 24

Scripture: John 8:31-36

Sermon Title: *Broken Signposts: Freedom*

Summary:

“The Bible shows us that our instinct for freedom has everything to do with the sense of the presence of God.”

NT Wright, *Broken Signposts*, page 119

Tish Harrison Warren (NYT): Certainly, the complexities of abortion and Covid prevention are different. These are not identical issues. But the mutual slogan points to an underlying agreement between these warring factions: They both understand liberty primarily as the absence of restraint.

This is how Americans in general tend to envision freedom. It’s what the philosopher Isaiah Berlin called negative liberty — the autonomy of individuals to do what they want to do. Personal choice is therefore the essential quality of liberty. We want autonomy as individuals to do what we want to do.

Americans deeply value this freedom. In a 2014 essay for *The New Republic*, Mark Lilla wrote that the dogma that unites Americans from right to left, unifying “civil liberties absolutists, human rights crusaders, neoliberal growth evangelists, rogue hackers, gun fanatics, porn manufacturers, and Chicago School economists” is this: “give individuals maximum freedom in every aspect of their lives and all will be well.”

Christian ethics call people to ideas of freedom that are not primarily understood as the absence of restraint, but instead as the ability to live well, justly and righteously. In *Galatians*, after an extended meditation on liberation, Paul says: “You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” Freedom, for him, had a purpose and end, a “telos.” We are freed not to do whatever we feel is best for us individually, but instead to love our neighbors.

Thomas Aquinas, a medieval Catholic theologian, gave us the gorgeous and helpful phrase “arduous good.”

Questions:

1. If you were to ask your neighbors or co-workers to define “freedom,” what words or phrases would they use?
2. John 8:31-32: *Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.”*
What are the conditions of our freedom according to Jesus?
3. Where, in your own life, have you or would you like to, experience the freedom that Jesus offers?
4. If Jesus is freeing us not just *from* our sins and limitations but freeing us *for* the sake of witnessing to his love and grace, what would Jesus-centered freedom look like to the people around us if we practiced it as Jesus wants us to? Think of COVID responses, homelessness, immigration, et cetera...