

“For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free”

4th of July Weekend

Galatians 5:1, 13-26
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Freedom! What comes to mind when you hear that word? How would you define it? How would you explain “freedom” to another person, especially someone from a different country?

Unfortunately, for me the word “freedom” has been tarnished a bit of late. Too often I have heard this term used by politicians to justify their own often intolerant nationalistic perspectives, or to promote their own narrow political agendas.

So I’m hoping we can reclaim the real depth of this remarkable word, rescuing it from partisan politicians; much like progressive Christians have had to reclaim a variety of theological terms, like evangelism and redemption and even salvation, rescuing them from religious fundamentalists who have become absolute in defining such term according to their own narrow perspective.

But on this 4th of July weekend, as we celebrate the 233rd anniversary of our declaration of independence and freedom from the imperialistic rule of the British Empire, it is only appropriate that we reflect upon the blessings of freedom and liberty - blessings that we too often take for granted in this country. Since 9-11, in fact, we have had to sacrifice some of our freedom for the sake of national security, or so we were told. We later learned, of course, that some of our freedoms were actually violated, without our knowledge at the time, by our own government. Regardless, no longer is freedom quite the given it once was, or at least we thought it was.

Yet we are still a country driven by, and perhaps rightfully obsessed with, the unalienable right to be free. As long as we don’t break any laws, we are indeed guaranteed the right to choose almost as we please. For the most part:

- we can choose whom to elect to government positions;
- we can choose which profession to go into;
- we can choose where we want to live, and what we want to buy;
- we can choose our spouse or partner in life (even if not legally, yet, for some);
- we can choose not only what church to belong to, but what religion we want to believe in, if any at all.

Added to these, there are other kinds of freedom for which we must continually struggle, like the **freedom from social, economic or political**

oppression. Such freedom is the liberation from economic exploitation, racism, sexism, and other forms of injustice.

Another kind of freedom is in a **psychological sense.** It involves the removal of damaging emotional barriers, the healing of past hurts, the achievement of true intimacy, and the end of certain destructive patterns of behavior in which an individual or organization may be trapped. **Yes, freedom is, and should be, a big deal for us.**

So it is also appropriate on this particular weekend, when our country celebrates its Independence Day, that today's Epistle lesson from Galatians begins with the words, **"For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."**

When the Apostle Paul wrote these words about freedom to the ancient church in Galatia (which was the name of a province in the Roman Empire, located in modern day Turkey), do you suppose Paul had the same meaning of "freedom" in mind that we do as people living in the United States of America in the 21st century?

The dictionary defines and associates freedom primarily with autonomy, independence, and power to make our own choices and decisions without coercion. For many people, this takes on the license to "do as I please." Remember, for instance, when it became the law (many years ago now) to have to wear a seat belt, and how upset so many people were because they didn't want to be told what to do. Yes, there always has been a fine line between public safety and what others consider government intervention.

Such a concept of 'doing as one pleases' would not be included, however, in Paul's understanding of freedom, at least not in Christian freedom. For Christian freedom is just that: freedom *in Christ*, not freedom in and of itself.

It is Paul's belief that since it is Christ who has ultimately set us free, we are therefore obligated to Christ. And that, we learn, means being bound to Christ's service out in the world. In verse 13 of Galatians 5, Paul writes, "you were called to freedom." The freedom he envisions here is the specific freedom from the ancient laws of Moses and how they *do not* pertain to earning salvation.

Perhaps the overarching theme of the entire New Testament is that being sinless and following the letter of the law perfectly does not bring about salvation. Rather, salvation comes only by and through the grace of God – a grace, I personally believe, is extended to *all* human beings, not just those who give assent to traditional Christian beliefs.

That being said, of equal importance to Paul is his insistence on the One who calls us to freedom - Christ. Paul urges the Galatians to remember their calling, **a calling that carries with it both freedom and obligation with responsibility.** Freedom may be attractive because we initially think it will demand *less* of us. Within time, though, we discover that the freedom to make our own choices actually makes greater demands on us. I'm sure you have recognized this in your own life.

Paul reveals more about his understanding of freedom when he warns, **"do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence," and here comes the paradox, "but through love become slaves to one another."** Paul's imagery of slavery here startles us, and perhaps even offends, for it seems incompatible with our notions of freedom, and is seemingly contradictory to what he has just said. **Paul, however, understands that all human beings are free in some sense and yet enslaved in another sense. The question is from what or whom we are free and to what or whom we are enslaved.**

To the church in Galatia, he urges freedom from the law, but that same freedom carries with it enslavement (using Paul's words) to not only Christ as our liberator, but also to others who belong to Christ. In other words, in our freedom we are called to a life of loving service to each other. The major challenge to us this morning, then, is **how can we lovingly serve each other better right here in this congregation, and out in our daily lives?**

Paul writes in verse 14, "For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" That commandment, by the way, didn't originate with Jesus, but comes from the Old Testament book of Leviticus – how's that for irony. **There is irony in Paul's understanding of freedom, as well. Freedom is not the opportunity to pursue our own interests in a self-indulgent and selfish manner, and this is especially true in church matters, but rather we are to be even more at the service of others.**

As an example, we, as a congregation, we are exercising our Christian freedom through allowing the Youth Mentoring Program of Kendall Whittier, Inc, to use our church facility for their wonderful neighborhood program; we are exercising our Christian freedom every time we serve a meal at the Day Center for the Homeless and take various collections for neighborhood schools and other organizations; we are exercising our Christian freedom through our ministry of inclusion and hospitality, welcoming those whom others do not welcome; and we are exercising our Christian freedom every time we offer our time, talents, and resources in volunteer service. And the list goes on and on.

I think we can recognize, therefore, that **freedom in Christ is not so much freedom from something, as it is freedom to do something.** Freedom in Christ is not freedom from responsibility or concern for others. Freedom in Christ is about the **freedom to love**, to live by the law of love, or as Paul says, to become slaves to one another out of love for God.

When we *don't* live this way, Paul warns, we face the consequences of destroying our sense of community, and perhaps even ourselves, in the process. When we *do* live by the Spirit of God, however, there will be wonderfully good consequences. Paul lists, "love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Paul calls these gifts from God the **"fruit of the Spirit."**

Paul's emphasis is always on the community-building character of the Holy Spirit's work. So, he warns the church to give up arrogant, envious, and competitive behavior. His vision of the church is that we should embody the love

of Christ in ways characterized by the "fruit of the Spirit. As Paul writes in verse 25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

So as we continue to celebrate this 4th of July weekend and the freedoms this country has to offer, let us also celebrate **our freedom in Christ, which is a call to loving and unselfish service to others.**

Amen.