

Called to Freedom and Service

4th of July Weekend

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

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
July 4, 2010

On this 4th of July weekend, it is appropriate that we reflect upon the blessings of freedom, independence and liberty - blessings that we too often take for granted in this country. And it is also appropriate 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." "Estad, pues, firmes en la libertad con que Cristo nos hizo libres." (Galatians 5:1)

When the Apostle Paul wrote these words about freedom (which were in Greek, not English or Spanish), do you suppose he had the same meaning in mind that we do as people living in the United States America in the year 2010?

I'm going to refrain this morning from making any comment about the increasingly revolutionary language recently used by some that we need to "take our country back". Back from whom? Our legitimately elected government officials? That kind of talk doesn't sound very American to me.

So let's turn instead to some other sources. The thesaurus identifies freedom with autonomy, independence, and power to make our own decisions. In other words, **our modern understanding of freedom in this country comes with the belief that as long as we stay within the boundaries of the law, individuals can pretty much take on a "do as I please" approach toward life.**

Such a concept, however, would *not* have been included in Paul's understanding of freedom, given the fact that they were under the domination and control of the Roman Empire, and especially not in Paul's understanding of Christian freedom. For **Christian freedom is just that: freedom in Christ, not freedom in and of itself.**

According to Paul, since it is Christ who has set us free, we are therefore obligated to Christ, and therefore bound to Christ's service in the world. In verse 13 Paul writes, "you were called to freedom." **The freedom he envisions here is freedom from the law, the ancient laws of Moses and how they no longer pertain to the issue of redemption and salvation. It is by God's loving grace alone that we are justified, and not by our good works or following some strict code of conduct.**

Equally important is Paul's insistence on the One who does the calling - Christ. Therefore Paul urges the Galatian Christians to remember their calling, a calling that carries with it both freedom and **obligation.**

Does not freedom, after all, pose new and additional responsibilities? The one advantage, perhaps, of living under the law is that our duties and responsibilities can be spelled out for us in great detail. There are many Christians today who are actually more comfortable having strict moral and ethical laws and boundaries define their conduct for them - instead of exercising their own autonomy in deciding on the responsible course of action to take in any given situation.

In churches like that pastors basically *tell* the congregation what to believe and how they must behave. (I wonder how long I could get away with that here at College Hill?!) This, however, simply acts to place people under a new set of laws. And if the people don't believe and act according to certain standards, they are told that they risk divine punishment and retribution.

For others, freedom may be attractive initially because we think it will demand less of us. Teenagers often believe this when they move away from their parents home for the first time. Sweet freedom at last is the typical sentiment. Yet we all soon discover that this freedom actually makes greater demands on us. Freedom is not a lifelong afternoon of 'free time' lying in a hammock sipping a favorite beverage.

Paul reveals more about his understanding of freedom when he warns, "**do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence.**" **There's an entire sermon in that one line.** This is followed by a paradox, "but through love become slaves to one another." Paul's use of slavery imagery startles and perhaps even offends us, for it seems incompatible with our modern notions of freedom.

Paul, however, understands that all **human beings are free in some sense and enslaved in another sense.** The question is *from* what or whom we are free and *to* what or whom we are enslaved. In Galatians, he urges freedom from the law, but that same freedom carries with it 'enslavement' to Christ as our liberator. But not only to Christ, but also to others who belong to Christ.

To put this in more palpable terms, **in our freedom we are called to a life of loving service to each other. How can we do that better and more effectively for each other right here in this congregation?**

Freedom in Christ, then, is not so much freedom from something, as it is freedom to do something. 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 that we face the **consequences of destroying our sense of community**, perhaps even ourselves, in the process. What follows are quarrels, dissension, factions, envy, and so forth. Paul says this results when we seek to "gratify the works of the flesh." We don't have time to get into this today, but by "flesh" Paul does not mean the physical body as opposed to the spirit. "Flesh," in this context, refers to a way of thinking or behaving that is separate from and against the guidance of the Spirit of God.

By contrast, when we do live by the Spirit of God, Paul reveals that there will be wonderful consequences: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Paul calls these traits the "fruit of the Spirit," and they are a gift from God.

We should not interpret this fruit, however, as referring only to individual personal character qualities. Paul, as always, is primarily concerned with the way in which the Spirit's work is made manifest in community – how we treat one another and live together as the people of God. His emphasis is on the peaceful and community-building character of the Spirit's work.

So, Paul warns those in 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.

We can use that list, then, as a measuring stick to see how well we are living together as a community of faith, and how well we reflect these characteristics with others in our daily lives, including with those with whom we disagree. Are we a

congregation that exhibits love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? I personally think that through God's guidance and empowerment we've been doing a darn good job. As Paul writes in verse 25, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."

So on this 4th of July, as we celebrate 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.