

“Freedom With Responsibility”

4th of July Weekend

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

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To be honest, I wasn't overly thrilled when I realized that the 4th of July fell on a Sunday this year, thus the unavoidable emphasis on freedom, liberty, and democracy in our service of worship. This past year, as we all know, put a bit of a different twist on all these things. It was a year dominated with the dramatic isolating regulations of the COVID-19 pandemic, an empowered racial justice movement reaching deeper into the national psyche than it has in decades, and politics often so focused on nationalism, as opposed to a true definition of patriotism, that our democracy flew off the rails like never before in recent history. Yes, **on this 4th of July, our democracy has been and still is being threatened.** So, let's just say that a current reflection on freedom and liberty will come from a different place, at least for me, compared to when I was young living in an all-white suburb outside of Chicago in the 1960s, where the 4th of July was simply all about an innocent celebration of the birth of our nation.

Yes, **terms like freedom and liberty have been all but hijacked in the opinion of many progressives. Therefore, we must work to reclaim and rescue these hallmarks of democracy from their divisive and partisan political polarization.** For example, **“we have the opportunity to celebrate patriotism differently – as a passion for the democratic ideal of equality and a commitment to narrowing the gap between that ideal and our lived reality.”** – Robert P Jones

On this 4th of July, therefore, as we celebrate the 245th 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 – yet too often are not, nor ever have been, extended equally to everyone in this nation.** Yet, we are still a country driven by 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 (that being said, even now voting rights restrictions are being enacted, as evidence of new Jim Crow laws);
- we can choose which profession to go into;
- we can choose what we want to buy (if we have the economic means);
- we can choose where we want to live (though, not every neighborhood will accept everyone);
- we can choose our spouse or life partner;
- we can choose not only what church to belong to, but what religion we want to practice and 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 with an emphasis on mental health issues, 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, true freedom is, and always should be, a big deal for us. Therefore, it is also appropriate on this particular day, when our nation celebrates its Independence Day, though many in the Black community now celebrate our new Federal holiday of **Juneteenth** as their Day of Independence, and as Native Americans celebrate **Indigenous People's Day** instead of Columbus 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." - Galatians 5:1

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 links **freedom** primarily with autonomy, independence, and power to make our own choices and decisions without coercion. For many people, unfortunately, this takes on the license to **"do as I please."** It wraps itself in the childhood mantra, **"You're not the boss of me."** We all saw this exhibited this past year by a large percentage of folks refusing to wear facemasks or be vaccinated, regardless of the risks to themselves and others. 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. The same thing happened when highway speeding limits were once dropped to 55 miles an hour. Yes, **there always has been a fine line between public safety and what others consider overbearing government intervention and control.**

Such a concept of 'doing as one pleases' would *not* be included, however, in the apostle Paul's understanding of freedom. After all, they were under the subjugation of the Roman Empire and couldn't consider themselves free according to our understanding today. Instead, **Paul addresses Christian freedom, which 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 as our liberator, and therefore bound to Christ's service in the world.** In verse 13 Paul writes, "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters."

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 redeemed, made right with God, and not by our good works or following some strict code of conduct. 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, not less?

Paul reveals more about his understanding of freedom when he warns, **"do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence"** (Gal. 5:13). As you can see,

freedom was never intended as a blanket “do as you please.” The major challenge to us this morning, then, is how can we lovingly serve each other more fully here in this community of faith, and out in our daily lives? For as 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.

We come to realize, therefore, that **freedom in Christ 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, to serve one another as our response to the love and grace that God has extends to us – to you, to me.** 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. That is why Paul warns those in the church, then and now, to give up arrogant, envious, and competitive behavior.

Paul's vision of the church is that we should embody the love of Christ in ways characterized by what he calls **the “fruit of the Spirit”**. **He lists those traits as, “love, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control”** (Gal. 5:22-23). Remember, **Paul's emphasis is always on the community-building character of the Holy Spirit's work.** We can use that list, then, somewhat 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.

As we continue to celebrate this 4th of July and the liberty and freedoms this country has to offer, **let us also remember how far we have to go to living into true freedom and equality and equity for everyone.** And let us also celebrate our freedom in Christ, which is a call to loving and unselfish service to others. For love is the way that freedom in Christ expresses itself, and that's what makes loving and unselfish service to others possible. For **with freedom comes responsibility.**

Amen.

Resources:

Robert P. Jones, “Let's celebrate this Fourth of July without the myth of white Christian innocence,” *Religious News Service (RNS)*, July 2, 2021