

To Be Free

Galatians 5:1, 13-25

July 3, 2022

Over the last few weeks, I've conducted an informal and decidedly unscientific survey, and here are the results: Most preachers have a complicated relationship with writing and delivering sermons for the Sunday closest to the Fourth of July. For starters, there is the ironic reality that many of our parishioners celebrate their religious freedom by skipping church on this particular Sunday. Okay, I got that out of my system. After all, you are the ones who showed up! Beyond that ironic annoyance, however, there is a deeper ambivalence about the celebration of liberty that we enjoy this weekend and how it fits with the understanding of freedom that is core to the gospel message, that is at the heart of Christian faith.

246 years ago yesterday, when the Second Continental Congress approved its resolution of independence, Thomas Jefferson drafted soaring language to describe the vision of this new nation. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights—that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Of course, we know that even self-evident truths can be disregarded, and the historical context of these words bears that out. Over the centuries, this luminous statement and the declaration it precedes has been more animating vision than lived reality. Liberty and justice keep beckoning from beyond our grasp. We have a charge to keep pressing toward that goal.

But the idea of human freedom did not originate on this continent or among our founders. In every age of human history and all around the globe, human beings, as the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty describe, "yearn to breathe free."

Three thousand years before Jefferson wrote those words, the Hebrew people suffered under captivity in the Egyptian empire. They yearned for freedom. God called Moses, who demanded of Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" What Pharaoh refused, God delivered, liberating those enslaved Hebrews with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Exodus, a way out.

Many centuries later, when God's people were again oppressed by the tyranny this time of the Roman Empire and by the prison of sin and death, Jesus of Nazareth appeared, preaching words that echoed the prophets of his own tradition. "The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free." To his closest followers, Jesus issued this challenge: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. And if you are my disciples, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

What kind of freedom is Jesus describing here? This is where the complexities surface for those of us raised to understand freedom as a *national* birthright rather than a gift of God.

"For freedom, Christ has set us free." The Apostle Paul is writing to a brand-new community of Christians living in Galatia. He writes out of concern that these disciples are rejecting the freedom they have in Christ to submit to old ways of living, cultural norms, other lords and gods. Paul insists that the Galatian Christians are free not because of anything they have done, but because of what Jesus has done. Paul insists that Christians are free from oppressive laws, free to live in the love and the light of God. Free indeed, but this God-given freedom is

not an end to itself. This God-given freedom is *not* an idol to be worshipped. Keep reading. “You were called to freedom...but do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, rather through love become servants to one another.”

For freedom Christ has set us free. And, that freedom binds us. It binds us to embodied communities. To selfless service. To one another. And so freed, we are bound, for without humility, without responsibility, freedom can quickly give way to pride, arrogance, and even domination. Paul knew this truth, and so he speaks of freedom not only as a gift, but as a responsibility.

Paul knew that in Galatia, the Christian church had become divided. Some believed that freedom meant the license to do whatever you pleased—freedom as an opportunity for excess, for disregard of anyone else. Others insisted on holding firm to the traditions of their religious ancestors. They insisted on adherence to the laws of purity and religious rituals contained in the Book of Leviticus. Two distinct factions have emerged in the church in Galatia. It is a time of dangerous dissension. The future of the church is in peril, and Paul is in a tough spot. He needs to find the right words to call together this fractured community, to unite this divided people. What he does is offer a new standard of obedience, a new definition of freedom.

Paul writes, “In Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

Christian freedom depends on fidelity to the law of love. Christian liberty is tethered to God’s love.

This love is not emotional affection or romance. Here we need Reinhold Niebuhr’s definition. The great 20th-century religious thinker puts it this way: “Basically, love means being responsible...by the pressures of history, toward the whole universe of humankind.”

To be free, in the Christian sense of the term, is to be liberated from the tyranny of selfishness, to be

liberated from the demands of tribal loyalty, to be liberated from the fleeting thrill of judgmental rage, to be liberated from captivity to fear.

A few years ago now, my favorite author Marilynne Robinson wrote an essay in the *New York Review of Books* with the title, “Fear.” The piece begins with a provocative sentence. “America is a Christian country,” she writes. After adding some important context to that assertion, she writes, “As a consequence, we carry a considerable responsibility for its good name in the world, though we seem not much inclined to consider the implications of this fact.”

In fact, Robinson notes, those who most vigorously claim the title “Christian” often bring “a harshness, a bitterness, a crudeness, and a high-handedness into the public sphere.” She’s right about that. This truth moves beyond irony and into the realm of tragedy. I think it not too much to say the Christian movement in this nation is failing in its foundational task—to see the image of God in neighbor, stranger, and enemy. I think it not too much to say we have capitulated to the intoxication of power, to the allure of influence. To say that we have succumbed to idolatries of ideology. To say that we have boasted about our rights and ignored our responsibilities. Robinson again writes, “When Christians abandon Christian standards of behavior in defense of Christianity, they inflict a harm that would not be in the power of any enemy.”

“When Christians abandon Christian standards of behavior...”

We must repent. We must change course. Of all people, followers of Jesus must be those who embrace the *responsibility* of freedom. Repeatedly in the gospels, given the opportunity to judge or condemn, Jesus preaches grace and practices compassion. Jesus, who identifies with the stranger, the prisoner, the hungry, the oppressed, the outcast, the marginalized. Jesus, who says that when we act on *their* behalf, we serve him.

This is the work of the church in our time. Indeed, I can think of no greater role for people of faith in this country than calling our leaders and all people to the responsibility of love. Friends, we can start with ourselves. We can speak and act in ways that model the kind of people we want to be, the kind of church we are commanded to be, the kind of nation we intend to build. For Christian freedom is never an end to itself. Like all of God's gifts, it carries with it a responsibility.

Civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer famously said, "Nobody's free until everybody's free." If true freedom comes not as the result of human leaders or cherished documents, but instead is offered as the gift of a gracious God, then this freedom must be offered to all God's children. We are not free until all are free.

And *this* is why Paul links our freedom in Christ to the fruits of the Spirit we produce. Friends, Jesus could not have been clearer on this point: his followers will be known not by the positions we hold, the possessions we acquire, or the authority we wield. We will be known by our fruits. *By our fruits.*

And so, Christian freedom is less about asserting our rights and more about shouldering our responsibilities. True freedom is fruitful.

Here's a question that is particularly pressing as we consider the call of Christian freedom. What are the fruits of our freedom? In what ways are we making faithful use of the liberation we have been freely given? Whose suffering have we relieved? Whose yearning voices have we heard? Whose God-given rights have we defended?

This is *not* an intellectual exercise. It is our mission.

As those reconciled by Christ, the call is to seek unity by listening for the voice of God in the stories of others. As those who benefit from privilege, the imperative is to serve those who lack what we take for granted. As those with a voice in places of power, the responsibility is to advocate for those whose

voices are ignored or drowned out in those very places. As those who live in relative security, the duty is to extend that freedom to others.

For we are not free until all are free.

If we take the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians seriously, if we follow them faithfully, we are faced with this truth: our lives are measured not by the amount of freedom we exercise but by the kind of fruit we produce, the impact we create, the gifts we share. The ultimate measure of our life will be the fruits of the spirit that are grown and shared through us.

For freedom Christ has set us free.

Free *not* to subdue, dominate, or control.

For the freedom we have been given is the freedom to be who God created us to be.

Defined by the responsibility of love.

Friends, this is the gospel.

This is what it means to be free, indeed. Amen.