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Galatians 5:1-5, 13-

FREE TO LOVE

When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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; that, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

As we prepare to celebrate next Sunday the signing of this document, our declaration of independence, we will talk about freedom. We'll have "Freedom-fests" and maybe even enjoy some "freedom fries" with our burgers or hot dogs. I remember moving to a new grade (and a new part of the school) in 1976, the 200th anniversary of our independence and the festivities and celebrations that went along with the anticipation of that event. Combine that with the emphasis after 9-11 and I have been witness to at least two periods of patriotic fervor.

Lately, however, I have begun to think that our freedom is getting to be a bit of a problem. Nevermind the little dilemma of history that we all know...when we celebrate that declaration, it wasn't a declaration for all of us. Even tho it says all men are created equal, that's not the promise that was lived out. What was lived out was initially that all white, land-owning, educated men were created equal. The rest of it has come much later and with a great deal of pain

and suffering, including a civil war that almost ended this dream of freedom and a fight for civil rights that has shaped (I dare say) everyone in this room in one way or another.

Freedom as a state of individual concern...looking out for "number one"...has become every bit a part of the American myth as the so-called "self-made man". We are witness now to crisis after crisis which hold at their cores some derivative of selfishness, of holding our own personal well-being or success above someone else's. Now maybe that is an American ideal, and maybe it is what the founding fathers had in mind, I don't know. But I do know this - it isn't what Jesus was talking about when he preached the Kingdom of God, and it isn't what Paul is talking about when he says "freedom".

Freedom, you see, is never a individual thing. This is my issue with the resurgence of libertarian ideals we've seen lately. There's a lot of libertarian ideals I agree with - more individual responsibility, more freedom, and that usually works until, as a seminary friend of mine said recently, those ideals meet up with a little thing called "reality". More freedom sounds great until someone infringes on your freedom with theirs...more individual responsibility sounds great too when you already have enough resources and opportunity to be responsible for.

Individual freedom is only meaningful in the context of communal freedom. My rights only mean something in relation to your rights. In the Lord's Prayer we say "*Our* Creator", not "*My* Creator" because we understand that life is a collective rather than individual reality. That's why our freedom is such a tricky thing. There is a delicate balance at play in our collective ecosystem where humanity and all living things are a part; and in one way or another, abuses of freedom inevitably upset this delicate balance. As Dr. King once said, "No one is free until everyone is free".

Eugene Peterson opens his paraphrased translation of Paul's letter to the Galatians with this commentary: "When men and women get their hands on religion, one of the first things they often do is turn it into an instrument for controlling others, either putting them or keeping them 'in their place'. The history of such religious manipulation and coercion is long and tedious. It is little wonder that people who have only known religion on such terms experience release or escape from it as freedom."

Paul was like this, Peterson says, using religion as a baseball bat to clobber people with until he was changed to "something radically and entirely different – a free life in God". "God", Peterson says, "[does] not coerce us from without, but [sets] us free from within". We should respond quite well to Paul's letter, after all we are in the land of freedom, right? Next Sunday we will celebrate this freedom and our independence as a nation. Yet whatever it is that Paul is talking about isn't the same thing it seems we're talking about when we hear freedom. Paul's freedom pulls us more closely together; it operates from the principle of "love your neighbor as yourself" not in spite of it. Paul says that we grow love by serving one another, yet our freedom seems to be pretty self-serving.

Listen again to Peterson's very damning version of Paul's indictment: "It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on."

And he could...for this is a pretty accurate portrayal of what our culture represents. It's not what we are, but it is what we seem to be buying into. We're allowing our freedom to consume us – instead of being freed into a world driven by the Spirit, by our relationship with God and therefore our connection to every other living thing, we have been driven by a set of rules that may have initially served to bind people to one another and to God, but now do quite the opposite. We have created a religious system that basically uses God to scare people into submission and to divide us into those who are in and those who are out.

That is what Paul is calling us away from. He is saying that God's redemption of Jesus' execution witnessed in our experience of Christ is the evidence of a whole new understanding. Christ has freed us to a new way of living - a way that asks us to be loving because we are loved, not because it is the rule as found in paragraph 4 of sub-section D in the manual. Please note that Paul's indictment of what he calls "the Law" is NOT an indictment of Judaism. Paul is a Jew, and such a good one that he considers himself blameless before the Law. Paul is preaching to the Gentiles that God has opened a new door for them. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ expands the circle larger than any of us could ever have imagined. God is available to anyone and everyone. And that kind of freedom should inspire in us something way beyond selfishness. Reading Paul makes me wonder how we could ever have gotten to a place where so many people think that the point of Christianity is their own personal salvation.

What does our freedom mean if we are just using it to tear one another apart? I know the common logic, it is the same that Paul was arguing against - If you want people to do what is right you must give them rules; they must know and keep the divine commandments. Freedom is found by obedience. But freedom is tricky and Paul seems to argue against plain obedience. In Greek the word we translate as freedom or liberty is *Eleutheria* and it seems to come from the roots for arriving (eleu) and where one loves (eran). The etymology points at *eleutheria* meaning the fulfillment of one's love as a growing and rising process, as advancing to a higher state of being, a process which is never done in isolation. Paul, he is trying to make clear to the church in Galatia, now thinks of freedom as freedom not just *from* something, but *to* something.

I have nothing against rules. Listen, rules can be very good. When I'm driving down Northwest Expressway, I'm glad we have rules. That's not a place where I want people expressing their freedom. And think what rules do for us in here. When Glenda plays for us, she is using rules. She has the freedom to play whatever she wants, but she restricts herself to the rules of that

particular song because otherwise we couldn't join in, could we? Notes on a piano can be a cacophonous mess or a beautiful melody, all because of rules. But those rules are really the boundaries of relationship. They help me to moderate my freedom with yours. Paul is calling people to be transformed into that awareness - obedient because of our freedom, not because of the rules.

This new lifestyle has its base in a *relationship* with the God of compassion and goodness rather than static obedience to a set of rules or system of beliefs. That's what results in good living, at least how Paul sees it. Christians, says Paul, need to make this relationship their focus and, like all relationships, it has rules. But just like with our partners or our friends and family we don't live by the rules, we live with them. The rules are always subject to love and bend when needed...sometimes they break...and sometimes they break in irreparable ways. But we don't operate our relationships based on the rules; the rules simply act as boundaries.

And let's just be frank. Paul is not talking about a relationship of equals. He makes it quite clear that we are to be obedient to God's way, his point is that we relate ourselves into that obedience, we don't just obey rules we live out God's love and kindness and that creates in us a more direct and full connection to God's way of living than any amount of legal observance would.

Paul spells that out in a very Greek way of thinking – a dualistic example of the Spirit and the flesh. Now Paul was just using a metaphor, but just like with religion we've taken this too seriously. Paul was a person of Hebrew descent...he did not think like a Greek person, he just understood how they thought and, like any good rhetorician, made his argument using their terms. Unfortunately we have made this into a spirit vs. flesh argument, as if they are separate things, opposed to one another. All that Paul is saying is that flesh is finite, but spirit infinite...so things that orient us to things that satisfy temporarily but fade away are of the flesh, perishable. But things that orient us towards the infinite are of the spirit. Paul says this many ways – there are things which lead to life and things which lead to death, following the way of spirit over the way of flesh leads to life.

It is still possible, after all, to enter a relationship with God and then abandon God's priorities and follow after selfish impulses at the expense of others. Just to follow one's impulses and to gratify one's own needs without regard for others is to live "according to the flesh". Not that our normal human impulses, whether sexual or for food or anything else, are wrong. They become wrong when they are handled in such a way that we do harm to others - and to ourselves. They are wrong when they become the point, not our connection to the larger whole.

Paul offers us a radically different sense of freedom than we have today. The freedom Christ gives is not freedom for self-indulgence but freedom *from* self to see a world beyond our own narrow desires. A yoke of slavery can be brought on by oppression, dedication to the borders surrounding God instead of God or our own self-indulgence. Desmond Tutu, a man who knows something about figurative and literal prisons, says "The goal of human life is to live beyond the small, narrow prison of our own cares". That's the freedom that Paul wants us to know. That's the freedom that he asks us not to squander.

Our freedom is a sign of our value to God. Since God values and loves us fully, we are given freedom. But just like any relationship, that kind of freedom requires responsibility. We have to recognize that if we are all created equal, as both the Biblical and American promises go, then we must see other people's freedom first. That's the only way it works. When we get caught up so much in our own freedom, we end up taking another's away. That's as true for you and I as it is for communities, corporations or nations. Our freedom, no matter how long fought for or well-deserved, can't be held by depriving other people of theirs.

Look, I understand. Freedom is scary. It's nice to think about it, but especially when it comes to our faith journey we'd like a little more guidance. I mean, having more agency over something we feel so tentative about in the first place isn't really great news. But I believe in that freedom. I'm not a person who thinks that God has some great design for people. Oh maybe there are some people God specifically sets out to do certain things. Author Donald Miller has a great bit about this - he says that if you're wondering if God has a plan for your life, then look at the Biblical stories. If a burning bush speaks to you, then you probably need to listen. If you have a dream that you are going to be second in command of Egypt, start paying attention...and seek counseling. If you have never had sex and become pregnant, chances are something is up. But for most of us, the pen and paper are set before us...we are to write our own story, and God is giving us the freedom to do so. And that terrifies us because we're afraid we'll get to the end and be like a bad movie...you know, the ones where the credits start rolling and you say, really? That was it?

Paul is very radical in his call for us to stand up in the freedom that Christ has shown us. It involves us being engaged now. We can no longer stand back waiting for God's dramatic call, we have to actually be a part of writing our own story. We have to actually use the freedom we have been given to remind or enlighten people about their own freedom...and we have to work to maintain that delicate balance between my freedom and your freedom.

I don't know about you, but this 4th of July I have something else to think about. Yes, I'll watch a parade and see some fireworks...but as I'm eating some potato chips and trying to find that cool spot in the shade I'll be thinking about something else. In the past, I've thought about that declaration of over two hundred years ago and what freedom means today. But this year? Well, I think I'll be wondering about a declaration from two thousand years ago and what that kind of freedom means today. For economic freedom has not made us free, other than superficially. Political freedom has not made us free, other than superficially. All of these forms of so-called freedom can only gain substance when we see our communal connection where there is a recognition and respect for the fact that "all people are created equal" and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights"...when we see that God has set us free to live a "life of the Spirit, [so] let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives."

That's the truth...the truth that sets us free.

AMEN



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