

July 3, 2022

Galatians 5:1,13-26

Christ has set us free to live a free life. So take your stand! Never again let anyone put a harness of slavery on you.

It is absolutely clear that God has called you to a free life. Just make sure that you don't use this freedom as an excuse to do whatever you want to do and destroy your freedom. Rather, use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself. That's an act of true freedom. If you bite and ravage each other, watch out – in no time at all you will be annihilating each other, and where will your precious freedom be then?

My counsel is this: Live freely, animated and motivated by God's Spirit. Then you won't feed the compulsions of selfishness. For there is a root of sinful self-interest in us that is at odds with a free spirit, just as the free spirit is incompatible with selfishness. These two ways of life are antithetical, so that you cannot live at times one way and at times another way according to how you feel on any given day. Why don't you choose to be led by the Spirit and so escape the erratic compulsions of a law-dominated existence?

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.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.

But what happens when we live God's way? God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard - things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely.

Legalism is helpless in bringing this about; it only gets in the way. Among those who belong to Christ, everything connected with getting our own way and mindlessly responding to what everyone else calls necessities is killed off for good – crucified.

Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, 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 means we will not compare ourselves with each other as if one of us were better and another worse. We have far more interesting things to do with our lives. Each of us is an original.

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These words were written by the Apostle Paul to the church in Galatia. It seems this church was using their new-found freedom in Christ to do whatever felt good to them. It seems they were good at taking care of their needs and feelings without worrying about the needs and feelings of others around them. "Free love" can very easily be twisted into a power play that abuses people. Paul saw the discord and abuse, and called the church to task.

We all have a strong desire for freedom; freedom from the pressures of work or paying bills or political or familial discord. We all have the inclination to want to do whatever we want to do or feel like doing, when we want to do it. Isn't that what freedom is all about? Well, yes and no. Just because the church in Galatia was free from the restraints, the requirements of the Law, didn't mean they were freed from life's responsibilities.

Paul reminds the Galatians of love's obligations by stating: "use your freedom to serve one another in love." Free to serve. Sounds like an oxymoron, right? Right up there with "jumbo shrimp". In our faith there are a lot of things that appear to be an oxymoron. Saint Francis of Assisi famously prayed: it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned, and in dying we are born to eternal life.

I find it is hard to express why this is true on paper. These and all the other faith oxymorons have to be experienced, in order to know how true they are. I will try to talk about our faith's most important oxymoron: love. It is the only thing I know of that the more you give away, the more you have. In fact, love becomes the most powerful force in the universe only when it is given away freely.

This is how it works: God is love. God, as love, is present, all the time, everywhere, freely, unconditionally. We experience God's loving presence in many, many different ways in our lives – in our parents' love, in the love of our family and friends, in our church's love. We may have also experienced unconditional love coming through the kindness of a complete stranger or the support of a teacher. These experiences of God came because someone, unselfishly, shared love with us.

When we are willing to reach out to someone else and offer a kind word, a smile, or some other kind of support or service, we are allowing God's love to flow through us. In return, we

are touched and filled by God's love, which energizes us, fulfills us, and frees us.

There are no words I can say that will prove this, but this is what Paul is writing about when he says we are to live a free life. Our freedom is dependent on the freedom of our neighbor. They will know freedom in their lives in and through love. For when one is told they are loved (more by deeds of love, than by words), then, in this acceptance, they will find inner peace, which in turn frees them from self-doubt and/or self-loathing. Paul tells us that the converse of this is true as well. When we only think of ourselves, only seek fulfillment of our needs and pleasures, and are unwilling to share love unconditionally, then we put ourselves on a path that will destroy our freedom; a path that will ultimately destroy us.

Paul had much more, very insightful things to say about the power of love to free us in this passage, which is why I have included the whole passage in the bulletin as an insert. I hope you will take time to read it carefully, more than once, especially the paragraph that begins, "It is obvious ...". It describes well the community, the world we live in now. Most importantly though, I want to encourage you to remember that the gospel, the good news, is God sets us free to serve.

So, on this Independence Day Weekend, as we celebrate the freedom our country is famous for, I pray you will be prepared to follow Jesus Christ and "use your freedom to serve one another in love." Whether it is in service and servanthood to family and friends, to a stranger, who needs a helping hand or a kind word, or even to the person you find hard to love, I pray you will freely choose to share God's love with the world around you. I promise you will find your spirit lifted up and liberated in ways you could never have imagined, for such love, Paul tells us, is "how freedom grows." Amen.