

Free!
Galatians 5:13-26
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Somehow, it is already the Fourth of July weekend! I trust you had great celebrations on Friday. Hopefully, your day was full of barbecues and lawn games, hours on or near a lake, sparklers and fireworks! However you celebrate the Fourth, it is a day to remember where we came from as a country and be grateful for the hard-won freedoms that we have and need to protect. After all, our country was started by a group of people who heard a call to freedom. Freedom from the heavy taxation and political oppression of England. Freedom to pursue life, liberty and happiness. Freedom of religion and speech. They heard that call, and they fought to secure their independence, to make that freedom a reality.

It's interesting that a lot of what we say about the founding of our country can also be said about the start of the Christian church. Here was another group of people – oppressed by the Roman Empire, bound by religious and secular laws that kept them impoverished, overtaxed by both the temple and the state. And, with Jesus as their teacher and leader, they sought out an alternative way. Like the colonists, the first Christ-followers were, as Paul puts it in the verses we just heard from Galatians, “called to freedom”.

We are, of course, the inheritors of both stories. More than two thousand years later, we who call ourselves Christians continue to follow Jesus as teacher and leader. And, almost 250 years later, we who are citizens of the United States have inherited the freedoms written into our Constitution and Bill of Rights by our forefathers.

Yet, that means we also have the challenge of figuring out what freedom means in our 21st century context. Now, when so many of our freedoms are under threat, that has become increasingly important. We are living in a time of change, fear, and frustration. In our country, we hear more and more about the end of DEI programs, increased racism, immigrants detained or sent away, redistribution of wealth and resources away from those who need them most. We must continue to ask, what is our role as followers of Christ in the midst of this?

Paul offers us some insights in his letter to the church in Galatia. Galatians is one of the best discussions of Christian freedom that we have in scripture, and its back-story may remind you of our own country's history.

Paul wrote to the Galatians in the midst of a controversy. In those first years after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were a number of Jews who embraced Christianity but believed that it was meant for Jews and Jews only. They felt that Gentiles should not be welcomed unless they converted to Judaism through circumcision and absolute acceptance of Jewish law.

Paul's letter is his argument against that thinking. He hopes to show that all people are invited to experience salvation and freedom in Christ not by following the Jewish law but through God's grace. We receive freedom in Christ when we accept God's grace and love for us and begin to live like Christ lived – in love. Freedom in Christ is, in fact, freedom from the constraints of the law and freedom to live with love as our guiding principle.

Paul often speaks of freedom from “the flesh” or from “sin”, other times he uses the word “self-indulgence”. These are all ways of talking about freedom from those things that separate us from God. That may mean freedom from the past - from the guilt or unworthiness we feel for the mistakes we’ve made or the pain left after being hurt by someone else.

But Christ also frees us from the pressure to live up to secular standards of value. We no longer need power, control, or ego massage – wealth, success, and prestige. Because for Jesus those things stand in the way of faithfulness.

Finally, Christ frees us from fear – fear of the future, fear of “the other”, and fear of death – because life in Christ is a life of wholeness and health and love today. Not just in the future or after we die, but today.

We need freedom from all of that – because when we are burdened by shame, guilt, or fear, we don’t act in healthy, loving ways. We act out in ways that hurt ourselves, hurt others, and hurt God. Paul gives a long list of those behaviors - fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

It happens to all of us. When we are afraid or feel unworthy, we are more likely to judge people for what they look like or how they behave. We’re more likely to exclude others – to put other people down so we can raise ourselves up. We’re more likely to argue or turn to violence rather than peace and compromise. And we’re more likely to numb ourselves with addictions to sex, drugs, food or alcohol. We do all things that are contrary to what we know about who God is and God’s kingdom values.

Yet, what Paul tells us is that when we are free in Christ, we are freed from all of those things – which, in turn, gives us freedom to be transformed. St. Augustine once said that true freedom is being what you are meant to be. We were meant to be the image of God. Freedom in Christ is freedom to live out that image, allowing it to be as fully realized within ourselves as possible.

How do we know if we have embraced freedom in Christ? Paul says we can see it in our own behaviors and attitudes – the fruits of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When the Spirit of Christ guides us, lives within us, we are freed from all those worries about self so that we can be kind, generous, loving people in the world.

Now, I’m going to assume that if you are here in worship, you are already convinced that this is a journey you want to be on. That you have chosen to come here tells me that you would like to be a person who lives out the fruit of the Spirit in your day-to-day life. You don’t want to be a person known for enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy but for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And yet, out there in the world today, in our country in particular, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, and envy seem to be the order of the day. While we may not participate in it, the question becomes what can we do about it? It’s easy when your

desire is to be a peaceful person to avoid quarrels and dissensions. Yet, as a person of conscience and one transformed by love, Paul says we are not only to love God and neighbor but to serve them, as well. And that means we can't turn our backs on what hurts our neighbor.

It's ironic – all through the first four chapters of his letter to the Galatians, Paul keeps saying, “You don't have to do anything to be saved”. We are saved by God's grace. But, then in this chapter Paul says, “Well, wait – there is one thing.” When we know that we are saved by grace, the inevitable response is love. Love of God and love of the neighbor. Yet, with that love comes responsibility and commitment to care for the welfare of others.

Oh, come on, you might say. How can my love or service change the atmosphere in our country or bring an end to war and authoritarianism, or racism and trans and homophobia? And you're right – to an extent. You alone will not change the nation or the world. But, we as a community at First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, and in the whole city of Ann Arbor, and with Christians and Muslims and Jews and Hindus and Buddhists in Ann Arbor and Michigan and the US and the world. We who are free to love – we just might make a difference. If through service and advocacy, we enact love in the world. If we challenge hate. If we stand up to racism, sexism, economic injustice, and oppression. If we teach peace. If we claim the freedom to love that is ours given freely by the God of love. We might be able to change the conversation. We might begin a little revolution of our own that helps to move all of us closer to the principles upon which our country and our faith were founded – justice, freedom, and integrity for all people.

And that would be worthy of more fireworks! May it be so. Amen.