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**Luke 9:51-62; Galatians 5:1, 13-25**

**"Freedom"**

Years ago, I spent several days in Washington D. C. in an effort to persuade Congress of the need for common sense immigration reform. As we witness the administration's attempts to round up and deport undocumented immigrants I am struck by the chaos and inhumane approach to resolving immigration issues. That time in Washington D.C. was my one and only attempt to lobby Congress.

For one day I got to roam the halls of power, speak with senators and representatives and be ushered like a big-shot through the underground tunnel system linking congressional office buildings with the Capitol. I must admit that it was pretty heady stuff and I can understand why some folks are drawn to political power like moths to a flame. However, my one day foray into politics at a national level was sufficient for me and I was happy to return to life as a normal person.

After leaving Washington D. C., I went to visit Gettysburg on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that bloody, horrendous battle that evoked perhaps the greatest political address in our nation's history. It was a sobering sight to drive the 24 miles of battle lines and realize that in a span of 3 days our country suffered 51,000 casualties, including 8,000 who died, fighting for the ideal of freedom.

What connects my visits to Washington DC and Gettysburg and our upcoming celebration of Independence Day was the fight for freedom. It's something we Americans prize enough to die for. Freedom formed the foundation of our nation. But our ancestors established a nation based not just upon freedoms but also responsibilities. Our freedom comes with a price - responsibility.

St. Paul reminds us of something similar as Christians, when he writes in Galatians 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery."

No more slaves to prejudice, ignorance and oppression, we are free in Christ to be who God intends us to be. But our Christian faith emphasizes not only our freedom in Christ but also our responsibility as a result of that freedom. Christ is the one who sets us free from the endless treadmill of "do this," and "don't do that." In Christ, our relationship to God has been restored, not by something we have done or refrained from doing, but by something God has done in Christ. We are therefore free from anxious religious striving, free from the endless effort to keep our slates clean in order to "get right with God." In Jesus Christ, we are made right with God. We are free.

But does our Christian freedom mean we can think, act, and be anything we like? You be the judge.

Listen to Paul as he speaks to the Galatians on freedom: "do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." Slaves? Wait a minute, didn't Paul just tell us in verse 1 that we are no longer under the yoke of slavery? What does it mean for Paul, in the same breath, to use the words, "freedom" and, "slavery?" It means that there is a peculiar nature of freedom in Christ.

Christian freedom is a byproduct of being committed to Jesus Christ. The New Testament really doesn't promote what our society calls "freedom." Freedom, of the kind promoted today, is a distortion of the truth - a fantasy operative among those who are so thoroughly enslaved that they have no idea what it would mean really to be free. That is why Paul speaks to his flock as being, "slaves to various passions" (Titus 3:3), slaves to the "elemental spirits" (Galatians 4:3), slaves "to drink" (Titus 2:3), and, in today's epistle, slaves to the "desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16).

On the other hand, Paul speaks in glowing terms of Christian leaders as "slaves" to their congregations (II Corinthians 4:5). He greets congregations in his letters calling himself a "slave of Jesus Christ" (Colossians 4:12). In other words, Paul asserts that the issue is not whether we shall be enslaved. Rather, the issue is, to whom shall we be enslaved?

Most of our ideas about freedom come from the Greek notion that truly free people are those aristocrats who enjoy great freedom because they live on the bright side of history. Thus, what we call "freedom" is too often the justification for the practice of unlimited consumption. Yes, we are free, but free to do what? Free to buy, to consume, to engorge ourselves on material things? In doing so we find there is an ever-rising threshold of expectation. The more we have, the more we want. Our freedom to over-consume shackles us to a treadmill on which we are endlessly running from this year's "new and improved" model to the next. That's not freedom.

We are just about to celebrate Independence Day, when we parade our freedom before the whole world. Thomas Jefferson's bold assertion that each individual has an "inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" still sounds sweet to our freedom-loving ears. Despite the foibles and imperfections of our political system, we still enjoy tremendous economic, political, religious, personal and communal freedom.

But we must be careful that we don't define the freedoms we enjoy so much solely as freedom from - forgetting that the real test of freedom's value is in our freedom to. Paul's caution to the Galatians reminds us that sometimes our greatest liberation can be found in our freedom to commit ourselves **to** someone or something. We must remember that the same statesmen who boldly announced this country's "Declaration of Independence" were also the same ones who worked long and hard to craft our Constitution - a document that shapes the boundaries of our freedom according to our responsibilities - our freedom to govern, to serve, to defend, to protect, to honor and to be loyal.

Christians believe that freedom is a gift of our relationship with Jesus Christ who makes us free.

That's why Paul rebukes the Galatians for the abuse of their freedom by the way they have lived with one another. We don't know the precise nature of the troubles faced by First Church of Galatia, but we do know that it must have been a bitterly divided church where, in Paul's words, people "bite and devour one another" (Galatians 5:15).

In contrast, Paul lists the "fruit of the Spirit" - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and self-control, all of which relate to living life committed to one another in community. In other words, Paul says that we are free in Christ, free from the need for excessive self-concern so that we can be other-concerned - actually what Paul says is so that we can be "slaves to one another."

You and I live in a society in which, too often, freedom is defined as the space and the permission to be utterly consumed by self-concern. Free time to go and do what I want, when I want, where I want and how I want. Enough money to buy for myself whatever I please. But Paul

urges another way, the way in which we are free from ourselves in order to be slaves to one another.

Pursuing happiness, focusing solely on the self and its personal pleasures, will never bring genuine joy or the fulfilling happiness of peace. When we pursue happiness for the self, it is like looking for the end of the rainbow - just when we think we've reached its touch-down point, our perspective changes and the rainbow's end has shifted again. Sometimes we focus so much on ourselves that we lose sight of the call of Christ to serve others. It is true that there is no place in Christian theology for self-hatred, self-persecution, or self-disrespect. But just loving ourselves was not the goal Jesus had in mind for us when he freely gave his life for our salvation. In other words, it's hard to hold a hand out to a neighbor when our arms are wrapped tightly around ourselves. As J. Walter Cross observes, "Self-made persons are a truly powerful argument against the use of unskilled labor."

Years ago, Janis Joplin sang a song written by Kris Kristofferson, called "Me and Bobby McGee" which had the line, "Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose." That was a catchy phrase but it implies no attachments or responsibilities that could be lost, which is the opposite of what Jesus teaches.

Freedom in Christ means having fewer attachments and responsibilities to ourselves and more to others. Freedom in Jesus Christ is experienced only when we commit ourselves - enslave ourselves to Christ and what Christ would have us do. And we know what Christ would have us do - welcome, love and serve others - especially the others no one else wants to serve. I think that sort of slavery is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the Galatians.

We all love our free time, which really is a misnomer. Time is not free at all. Time comes with constraints and responsibilities. I remember a time at a General Assembly meeting of the Presbyterian Church (USA) when we were engaged in a lengthy debate on a contentious issue. It was late in the evening, probably 11 or midnight when someone asked the moderator, "How much time do we have to debate this issue?" Her response was, "We have all the time there is." She was right. We don't create time; we can't add to it; we can't subtract from it. We have only the time there is. And it is up to us to make the most of it.

I have discovered since I retired that time spent focused solely on myself is pretty unsatisfying. Fulfillment comes from harnessing ourselves, enslaving ourselves to others. People who spend their days, nights or weekends working - working sometimes more than they worked to earn a living- hauling extra food from restaurants to the needy, volunteering in hospitals, serving on boards, visiting the homebound and dishing up meals for the homeless find satisfaction in serving others.

In those cases, the yoking of their lives to the lives of others is very close to what Paul described as slavery.

If freedom is what we want - true, genuine, freedom - then we have it through Jesus Christ who frees us to commit ourselves to others. It is in serving that we find both freedom from, and freedom to.

I can think of no better week than this one when we celebrate Independence Day to celebrate our freedom from self-involvement and our freedom to serve others. Freedom is just another word for everything left to gain - in Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**