

## **Freedom From And Freedom To Galatians 5:1,13-25**

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I find myself approaching the Fourth of July this year with a complex set of emotions. I am grateful for what this holiday stands for. Two-hundred-and-forty-six years ago, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, a group of colonists came together to sign a document declaring that the thirteen British colonies founded on the soil of North America were free from control by the English government. They would come together to form one new nation built on what they considered these self-evident truths that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights including life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

These words from the Declaration of Independence have led the United States to be a beacon of hope for those living in other countries where the pursuit of happiness was limited or impossible because of devastating economic conditions, war, or oppressive governments. People from around the world have to come to this country in hopes of building a better life for themselves - pursuing what we've come to call the American dream.

Yet, we also know that in 1776, these words were aspirational, reflective of a worldview in which only white men of European descent were actually created equal. That many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence held African slaves whom they did not consider "men". That white women didn't receive the right to vote in this country until 1920, and black women until 1965. That much of the land on which this new country was built was pillaged from the indigenous peoples who lived here long before any Europeans settled here.

Yet, we uphold the ideals of the Founding Fathers even as we celebrate that we have come so far in expanding our understanding of who receives those unalienable rights. The slaves were freed, women can vote, and in some places, at least, reparations have been made to indigenous communities for the land taken from them so long ago.

But, that's what leads me to such mixed feelings as July 4 rolls around this year. In just the last two weeks, let alone the last two years, it feels as though we, as a nation, are challenging and struggling with what freedom means. As we watch the January 6 hearings, we are asking, does freedom in the United States mean freedom to attack the capital building, take lives, and plot the execution of the vice president? And with the overturning of Roe vs. Wade, many are asking why they have lost the freedom to make decisions about their own bodies while LGBTQ couples are wondering if they will soon lose the freedom to marry. And, of course, ever present in our society is the question of why the freedom of Black people seems to always be limited by the systems and structures upon which our country is built.

I celebrate and give thanks for the freedom that the 4th of July represents. At the same time, I grieve freedoms taken away, freedom taken advantage of, and freedom withheld from some while taken for granted by others.

Which is why, this year more than ever before, I am choosing to view the Fourth of July through the lens of a different kind of freedom - the freedom granted to me through my faith in

Christ. Christian freedom is both complementary to and counter cultural to the freedom we hold as citizens of the United States.

For example, the freedom we receive through grace and forgiveness and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ truly is available to all people. God does not place limits based on color of skin, biological sex, gender, sexual orientation, income level, housing status or disabilities. God's freedom is universally accessible to any human being who seeks it out. Christian freedom is the freedom to truly embrace the fullness of who God created you to be and all of the beauty and potential of the life God has given you.

No biblical author has written more eloquently about Christian freedom than the apostle Paul, particularly in his letter to the Galatians. The Galatians were members of several churches in the geographic area known as Galatia. These churches were founded by Paul and built on the gospel of Christ which holds that all people are children of God, loved, accepted and free. However, after Paul left Galatia, some other teachers came to the area insisting that gentiles could not be Christ followers unless they followed the laws of Moses including the requirement to be circumcised. Paul writes to the Galatians to make clear that there are no requirements for entrance into the Christian community. You may recognize the famous verse, Galatians 3:28 "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

In our scripture reading for today, Paul starts with the words "For freedom Christ has set us free". We are set free by Christ from all of the baggage we carry with us that limits us from growing in love and joy. That means free from the mistakes we've made in the past, the guilt or shame we've allowed to define us, the boxes that others have put us in, the judgments of others.

Set free from the cages of self-doubt and self-recrimination, we are then free to make a choice. Our choice is whether we will return to what Paul calls self-indulgence, or sins of the flesh, or we will strive to live in love. This is what is truly counter cultural. Rather than choosing behaviors that are destructive to ourselves and our community, freedom in Christ gives us the freedom to love, to love our neighbor, as Christ commanded. To respond to the situations that are hurting or frightening or infuriating to us not by acting in ways that cause more brokenness but in ways that are grounded in love.

As we look around at what is happening in our country right now, and perhaps as we consider the relationships in our own lives, it's interesting to consider the examples Paul gives of each option - a life of self-indulgence or a life of love. Though his examples of self-indulgence begin with a few that are sexual in nature, he then gives a long list of behaviors and emotions that involve how we relate to one another. The sins of the flesh include enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions and envy.

The same is true when he speaks of our other option - to live our lives in love, to live a life in the Spirit. The evidence that we are striving to love God and love our neighbor is "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control".

Ultimately, Christ sets us free to choose how we relate to others, to God, and to the earth. We make this choice over and over again, with every relationship we have and every circumstance we experience. We can look at our lives and see the choice that we are making. If

you examine your life and you find a lot of broken relationships, if you examine your heart and find a great deal of resentment or bitterness, you may be using the freedom Christ gives you to return to self-indulgence. If you look at your relationships and into your heart and see love and joy, you are choosing life in the Spirit.

The same can be said as we look at our country. While we often hear the U.S. described as a Christian nation, when we look at all that is happening right now, we see an awful lot of evidence of self-indulgence, the sins of the flesh. There is so much anger, dissension, conflict, and division.

The good news of Jesus Christ, though, is that as a Christ-centered congregation, we have the opportunity to be an example of a different way – a community that lives in the Spirit, that lives in love, that is truly free. In how we care for one another, in how we care for others, we can demonstrate what it looks like to be a community that centers love, grace, forgiveness, and compassion.

That is our calling as a church and as individuals, articulated in these words from the great theologian, pastor, and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “freedom is not a quality which can be revealed--it is not a possession, a presence, an object, nor is it a form of existence--but a relationship and nothing else. In truth, freedom is a relationship between two persons. Being free means "being free for the other," because the other has bound me to him. Only in relationship with the other am I free.”

In a few moments, we will come to the Communion table to share in the meal that unites us, strengthens and nurtures us. As you come forward today, may you take a moment to reflect on your relationships. What are you choosing with the freedom Christ has given you? What evidence do you see in your life? What changes might you make to find the freedom that comes with living a life in love?

May it be so. Amen.