

A New Spirit of Freedom

Galatians 5: 1, 13-25

July 6, 7, 2019

Beargrass Christian Church

INTRODUCTION.

How did you celebrate Independence Day?

Did you get together with family members and friends?

Did you cook out or get a bang out of some fireworks?

Did you participate in parades or other community events?

Did you take time to give thanks and recall why we celebrate?

We remember Jefferson's bold assertion that each person has an "inalienable right" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Yes, we have problems and imperfections with our politics.

But we still enjoy tremendous economic, political, religious, personal, and communal freedom in our country.

But for our freedom to "work" we must be good citizens.

It is a privilege to be able to vote, pay taxes, obey laws, respect people and property, be loyal, and keep the peace.

Our freedom is a gift—but we have to be diligent to preserve it.

And as you probably know, democracies are on the decline in our world.

Historians tell us that ancient democracies eventually unraveled because of human selfishness and misaligned allegiances—especially "I pledge allegiance to myself."

The average age of the greatest civilizations is 200 years.

Nations progressed this sequence—from bondage to spiritual faith to great courage to liberty to abundance...

But then, from abundance to selfishness to complacency to apathy to dependency—then back to bondage.

Where do you think most of the people in our nation are today?

If we want to make America great—a land of liberty and justice for all—where in that civilization sequence do we want to be?

Where do we need to be?

I appreciated the perspectives in a recent newspaper article—especially since we are already being bombarded by attack ads—although I don't think they ever stop now.

The author said what we know: "Civility is in short supply."

"But a core set of American values remains, rooted in freedom and the experience of generations of self-government.

"They encompass the dream of a better life for our children.

"They are an expression of life and liberty of a free people.

"Independence Day is our patriotic holiday—and most Americans—90%—believe that they are very patriotic.

"And yet, for some people the word 'patriot' has become a rallying cry—for others it implies thoughtless nationalism.

The author noted our political paralysis and polarization, and he urges us to spend more time reaching out than preaching out.

He said for things to change we the people, not just politicians, must do the work to recapture the American spirit.

He proclaimed: "Patriotism is not a thoughtless glorification of all things American—it is the recognition of our ideals."

SO HOW DOES FAITH INFORM OUR FREEDOM?

There is a powerful paradox at the center of the Christian faith.

Through Jesus' example of freedom in loving service, we all become the most free when we bind ourselves to God.

Someone described Jesus as "omnipotence in bonds."

Jesus freely chose to take on the role of a servant.

He freely sacrificed himself for our sake and for our freedom.

We are to do the same, but it is hard to give up our freedom.

You might appreciate this story about a wedding—it reminds me of the one we had Saturday afternoon in our chapel.

An older man and woman made the decision to get married.

Despite her age, the woman was a feisty, free-spirited person.

Everything went very smoothly until it came time for the vows.

The retired minister used some of the old, traditional vows.

He asked her, "Do you promise to love, honor, and obey him?"

She wrinkled her brow as she thought about the question.

After a moment she said, "Love and honor, yes. Obey, no!"

The groom smiled and said, "I guess two out of three isn't bad!"

So the ceremony continued, they made it official, she had all the freedom she wanted—and they lived happily ever after.

Can you identify with the woman's feelings—we want freedom.

We don't like to be under someone else's control.

We want liberty in the choices and decisions we make.

But I suspect that many of us know from experience that freedom can wear a variety of faces—it can be used and abused.

This is one of Paul's concerns for First Christian Church, Galatia.

He tries to describe what it really means to be free.

Great freedom is often found in our greatest commitments.

We have freedom to gather together for the benefit of others.

We have freedom to love and serve each other.

We have freedom to express our feelings, concerns, hopes and aspirations for our community, neighbors and friends.

Paul talks about fleshly "works" and spiritual "fruit."

But he prefaces the lists with an important reminder.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

It is true that there is no place for self-hatred or self-persecution.

But loving ourselves first is not our primary goal.

Think about it—when do you feel better about yourself?

Do you feel better as a "couch potato" watching sports—or after an afternoon coaching a Little League game or soccer match?

Do you feel better after whipping up your favorite dessert and stuffing yourself—or after delivering it to a neighbor or homebound member of the church?

Do you feel better about yourself after an expensive "night on the town"—or after serving a meal at a homeless shelter?

Or talk to some of our youth and adults about their mission trips—hear the excitement in their voices as they talk about their joy from helping others.

We are free to become self-serving—or free to serve others.

A friend tells about a person who said he was a “self-made man.”

After boasting about his accomplishments and success, he asked the minister, “Well, what do you think of my story?”

The pastor was brutally honest: “My dear friend, you have just relieved our Almighty God from an enormous responsibility.”

She said: “Self-made people are powerful arguments against the use of unskilled labor.”

Paul offers us words of caution and words of encouragement.

We are not to confuse God’s freely offered liberty for license.

It is so very easy and tempting—to slip from one to the other.

Freedom to love can become self-serving sexual behavior.

Freedom to worship can become idolatry.

Freedom to serve can become chances for self-glorification.

Freedom to inquire can develop into feelings of enmity.

Freedom to discuss can disintegrate into bickering.

Freedom to disagree can lead to division and dissension.

Freedom to thrive can evolve into pride and boasting.

A respected theologian argues that the greatest mystery of human existence is not the reality of evil, injustice, or hatred.

“Rather, the greatest mystery in the universe is human freedom.”

“God has chosen to let us order our lives in any way we see fit.

“We are free to become a tyrant—or a Mother Teresa.

“We are free to give our lives to God—or not.”

Many of you “get it”—like one of our young adults.

She said: “My parents were abusive, verbally and physically.

“They didn’t control their tempers—they took it out on us.

“But I no longer hold feelings of anger over what happened.

“If you need revenge, forgive; that’s the best revenge of all.”

“I have found that there is a great deal of freedom in forgiving.

OUR LIBERTY CAN ALSO LEAD TO LOYALTY.

Paul says be careful—use your freedom wisely!

It provides opportunities for others—and you—to experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness—the fruit of the Spirit.

Freedom is a gift to be used to be servants of others.

And we might hiccup again: “Servants?! Servants aren’t free!”

“This makes no sense—now we’ve LOST our freedom again!”

But he might remind us that true liberty leads to loyalty.

We are free—we are truly free—when we give it all to God.

Examples are plentiful and powerful and meaningful.

Think about Paul—who wrote many of his letters from prison.

He was far from free physically.

But by the grace of God he was spiritually free.

Think about Mandela—who spent years in a tiny jail cell.

Was he free physically?

No...but he was free because of God's love and presence.

Think about Harriett Tubman, a slave who became a great emancipator and who worked with abolitionists.

She was given the nickname of "Moses" because of her efforts to lead others to freedom—especially through the Underground Railroad.

It will be good to see her face on our \$20 bills soon—instead of the one that is there now—a slave-owning, genocidal person who caused tremendous harm to Native Americans.

Or think about some of the images from the CYF mission trip.

In Alabama our youth heard many heart-breaking stories.

Too many women and men lost their lives because of racism—it's still happening today.

And yet, even as slaves, even in bondage, they sang spiritual songs about freedom, overcoming, and dreams of better days.

Or consider more personal times when liberty led to loyalty.

Maybe there were moments when we willingly gave ourselves over to something or someone—greater than ourselves?

We were offered a wonderful job and signed on the dotted line...and began years of a fulfilling, rewarding vocation.

We said to our best friend and partner, "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, I give myself to you."

Or maybe it was when we held that tiny baby in our hands?

And she was all wrinkles and squirming and softness.

And we were big and powerful and strong.

And we were free—and we could walk away.

But she wraps her finger around our hearts and all we can say is "Thank you. Thank you, God, for this precious gift!"

Liberty finds its life in loyalty.

True independence comes from our dependence on God.

That's the great, Good News for this day—for this time.

We are free—we are free to come and go!

We are free to be this and to do that!

But we find the depth of our freedom in commitment...

To values and ideals that bring out the best in us!

To careers and service that lift us beyond ourselves!

To relationships that really matter!

And perhaps our most satisfying experience of freedom comes...

When we choose to love, honor...and obey...

The God who sets us free.