

3 Pentecost, Proper 8, Yr. C  
June 30, 2019  
Galatians 5:1-3, 13-25

It's no surprise that July 4<sup>th</sup> is approaching – you can tell by the calendar, by the increasing traffic and by the opening the fireworks stands. If it weren't for the 2,000 year time difference, it might seem like even Paul is getting into the act with this letter to the Galatians and its theme of freedom.

First, a word about the context of the letter. It's one of only two letters where Paul sets out his theology, rather than responding to a specific problem. In this case, though, even though the letter is a theological argument, it still is an apparent response to a question coming from Galatia. It's probable that the church was largely made up of Gentiles and it's also probable that after Paul had been there and established the church, some other preachers came in behind him and preached a different message, telling them, in effect that Jesus was a Jew, which mean that there was a Jewish Messiah who was sent by the Jewish God, who came in fulfillment of the Jewish law. So, think about it: doesn't it make sense that anyone who wants to be a follower of Jesus should first become a Jew? And the mark of membership in the Jewish community is circumcision. So, if you want to be RIGHT with God, and be assured that you are right, circumcision is what you have to do. You have to become Jewish if you want to become Christian.

We've heard this before; it was a recurring problem. When Paul was with the Galatians, he had taught that no one could get right with God by keeping the law. It's not the law that's the problem, it's the people. We all sin despite our best efforts. Paul's message was that God, knowing this, in an act of pure grace, sent Jesus and it's faith and trust in Jesus, and the kind of loving lives that we can lead because of that faith and trust – that's what gets us right with God. To go back to the law, Paul says, is to deny one's experience of God's grace and the very meaning of Christ.

For modern readers to understand what Paul is talking about here, we need to remind ourselves of some of the concepts he's using. First of all, you'll remember that the law Paul is talking about isn't the moral law. So when he talks about getting rid of the law, he's not advocating some kind of lawlessness. Instead, he's talking about all the Jewish ritual laws. Second, when he talks about the flesh, he's using the Greek word "sarx" which doesn't mean flesh as in bodies, but rather means that part of the human predicament which prefers self-seeking and self-gratification to love of God and neighbor. And it's worth noting that Paul isn't saying that human desires are bad, just that they can easily get out of whack. Because we're human, Paul says, we tend to want the wrong things, or to want the right things in the wrong ways. So, to use his

language, we want intimacy and try to find that in fornication and adultery; we want contact with the divine and fall into idolatry; we want joy and instead settle for carousing.

Central to the letter is the discussion about freedom. There all kinds of freedom and, by extension, all kinds of bondage. In this letter, Paul wants his readers to come to know the freedom from guilt and the fear of a wrathful God and the fear of death that we learn from Christ. And he also offers the freedom that we can achieve if we turn from indulging those disordered desires that we have – all the ones he's listed – that can enslave us. That's not a strange idea for us, although we'd probably be more likely to talk about obsessions and addictions, but I don't think we'd argue that we can get well and truly caught by them. For Paul, it's the spirit of God within us, that gift of grace, that frees us from all that and gives us the strength to live, instead, out of love, joy, peace – all those things against which there is no law.

For Paul, freedom is about movement to a kind of spiritual maturity: first acceptance of grace and then trust in God and finally, because of that trust, to be able to live a life of loving service to God and our neighbors. Reinhold Niebuhr put it this way when talking about the kind of love Paul was advocating: "Basically, love means...being responsible, responsible to our family, toward our civilization and now by the pressures of history, toward the universe of humankind." Responsibility: if we are thinking only in terms of self-gratification, then responsibility is one of things we want to avoid.

To be really free, then, means to be liberated from the prison of self-centeredness, as someone said, from the prison, of "me, myself and I." It means to be able to move beyond the self and to move into the risk of love and to give oneself to the demand of service. It's to be free FOR responsibility, not to be free FROM responsibility.

Freedom is a complex concept. And it's a concept that we have to grow into. I was recently at a gathering where there were a number of little kids. And I was thinking that if you were to ask them what freedom was, they would probably answer in terms of freedom from any constraints: no bedtime, no vegetables, no denial of as much candy as I want. Add a few years and it would perhaps be about having all the beer I want, or having a fast car, or lots of dates – but the underlying principle is the same: freedom means no restraints. Freedom is equated with license. I want to do what I want to do.

Usually, if all goes well, we grow out of that limited idea as we mature. Unfortunately that's not always the case. I saw a story about a woman who was living in a horrible neighborhood who decided something had to be done about it. She knew that money was key, so she started a fund-raising drive, called people, wrote letters, got a grant. In the end she collected \$85,000 and then she used that to move to a different neighborhood.

One more thing about Paul and his thought here. He knows that every person has an ultimate allegiance to something – something that gives their life meaning. He uses the language of slavery, which isn't how we would talk about it today, but his point is that we have to choose what that ultimate allegiance is going to be. It's a choice between God and all the lesser gods that cater to our self-centeredness. With grace, we can avoid those things that pull us away from love and embrace those things that enable us to becoming loving servants, growing into the persons we are intended to be.

Because we're nearing the 4<sup>th</sup> and our celebration of political freedom, it's good to remember the vision of those first settlers who named their towns things like New Haven and New Hope and Salem, which just means shalom, the peace of God. And then we remember also the aspirations of the drafters of the Declaration of Independence who said that it was self-evident that all men were created equal and were entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. They had a vision of what this country could be. We're not there yet. And to get there will require that understanding of freedom as a choice to live in a way that means that we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus who said that the spirit had anointed him to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free. And in the words of this letter, we're to find out our own deep freedom in loving service to others.

Brian Doyle has written a book called *Uncommon Prayer*, in which he laments that love is such a tough assignment. Why couldn't the Lord have given us something easier, like astrophysics or quantum mechanics, he wonders.

"But no - love those you cannot love. Love those who are poor and broken and fouled and dirty and sick with sores. Love those who wish to strike you on both cheeks. Love the blowhard, the pompous, the arrogant liar. Find the Christ in each heart, even those. Preach the Gospel and only if necessary talk about it. Be the Word. It is easy to advise, to pronounce and counsel and suggest and lecture; it is not so easy to do what must be done without sometimes shrieking. Bring love like a bright weapon against the dark. Our Rabbi did not say ...convene conferences or issue position papers. He was pretty blunt about the hungry and the naked and the sick...The church should be a verb....Let us pray that we are...ever fomenting the revolutionary counter-cultural thing that could change life on this planet. It could, you know. Let's try again today. And so: amen. (quote amended) I'd like to emphasize that one line. BRING LOVE LIKE A BRIGHT WEAPON AGAINST THE DARK.

And I'll add my amen to that.