

OUTER AND INNER FREEDOM

(07/04/2021)

Scripture Lesson: Galatians 5:1, 13-25

“For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1)

This morning’s scripture reading is taken from Paul’s letter to the church at Galatia. It seems *apropos* for our worship today, the Fourth of July, a time when we celebrate the freedom that is ours, when we commit ourselves to the establishment and protection of freedom in our nation and around the world, and when we identify the ways that we are not free, the ways in which our freedom and other people’s freedom is impinged or limited.

The cause of freedom is inextricably interwoven with our national identity. The Pilgrims and the Puritans came to our shores in search of religious freedom. The Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the Civil Rights movement were battles or movements for freedom. The struggle for equal rights for women, for racial and ethnic minorities, for the LGBTQ community is an ongoing struggle for freedom. Although our national history has been more than a little checkered in its commitment to ensure freedom for *all* people, as evidenced in recent legislative attempts to take away people’s constitutional rights, like the right to vote or the right to be one’s authentic self, the founding ideals of our nation call us to the sacred task of enabling people in our country and around the world to become free and empowered in self-determination.

I do not believe that freedom is a human invention, a social construct. I believe racism and other forms of prejudice are human inventions, social constructs, which is why I subscribe to Critical Race Theory, the observation that racism and other forms of prejudice in our country are grounded not in biology but in an attachment to a belief in white heterosexual male supremacy that artificially creates and then systemically subordinates entire classes of people within our society. Freedom, on the other hand, is not a human invention, a social construct. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be truly human. It is a fundamental part of what it means to be a child of God.

Our Judeo-Christian scriptures testify to the importance that God places on human freedom. As articulated in the myth of creation that is recorded in the Book of Genesis, God gave human beings free will. I believe that the gift of free will was God’s greatest gift to us, to humanity. God not only created us; God wants to have a relationship with us. To this end, God guided the evolution of consciousness, enabling us as emerging human beings to make conscious, not instinctive choices. There can be no relationship and no love without the precious gifts of consciousness and free will. And where would we be, what would we be without relationship and love? Certainly something less than human.

If God is omniscient, God must have known what a mess we human beings would make through our use and abuse of this special gift of consciousness, of free will. If God is like a loving parent, as Jesus indicates, then God cuts us, his children, a good deal of slack. God gives us the resources we need to live a loving and compassionate life. God guides us not only through scripture and the church but also through the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. God does not compel us to obey, but rather calls us into relationship. God will not take away our freedom, not even for our own good! Religious freedom, the freedom to fashion our own beliefs and to work out our own relationship with God is apparently very important.

This morning I would like us to think about two kinds of freedom--outer and inner. In each of these realms we need to identify the enemies of freedom, enemies both outside us and within us.

In 1941, as the Second World War raged throughout Europe, the German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm wrote a social psychological treatise entitled *Escape From Freedom*. This is one of the books that I went back to reread during the pandemic as I watched the rise of authoritarian movements in our country and around the world. Fromm, as an existentialist, placed a strong emphasis on both freedom and responsibility. He realized, from his own experience living in Europe, that many people are afraid of freedom, afraid of the responsibility and the attendant insecurity that accompany it. They would rather have others make decisions for them.

Fromm says that if we consciously or unconsciously wish to flee from what the existentialist Soren Kierkegaard described as the “dizzying responsibility of freedom,” there is someone who is only too willing to take it away from us. If this were not true, dictators would have no power. Dictators only have the power we give them in our effort to escape the freedom and the attendant burden of responsibility that is inherently ours. Thomas Jefferson presaged this thought when he observed that “timid men prefer the calm of despotism to the tempestuous sea of liberty.”

There are obvious and sometimes not so obvious outer enemies of freedom. Some of the enemies of freedom dwell in other countries; some are closer to home. As Abraham Lincoln once said, “America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves.” Some of the forces that threaten our freedom are secular, while others, sadly, are religious. If we take Fromm’s warning seriously, we will realize that we need to identify and take a stand against both our fear of freedom and our blind allegiance to anything or anyone in the outer world that would take away or limit our freedom or the freedom of others.

This morning, however, I would like us to focus on inner freedom. When the apostle Paul talks about freedom in his letter to the Galatians, he is not talking about being free from the yoke of Roman rule. He is talking about being free from those forces within us that would enslave us.

When Paul identifies what he calls “works of the flesh,” he is talking about forces within us that would lead us away from a life in the Spirit. These “works of the flesh” are negative thoughts, negative feelings, and negative attitudes. Negative or hurtful behavior, e.g., licentiousness, strife, quarrels, and drunkenness arise from the delusional belief systems of idolatry and egocentrism. When we become caught in this delusional way of thinking, seeing, and feeling, we are not in the kingdom of God.

Since negative behavior arises from within, it seems that a good place to start in our quest for the kingdom of God is with our thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. Paul tells us that negative thoughts and feelings take away our freedom. They prevent us from doing what God wants. Since our lives are ultimately grounded in the Spirit of God, Paul says that deep down we really want to do the will of God, even if we do not realize this or if we forget it.

We can become enslaved by hurts or resentments. When we are unable to forgive, we are not free. We are enslaved to a feeling, an emotion, a certain picture of others or ourselves. We cling to the feeling or belief that we were betrayed or victimized. We feel a sense of injustice that things happened the way they did. For as long as we hold onto these hurt feelings from the past, we are not free to live a loving and compassionate life in the present.

We can become enslaved by anger. We have a certain picture of how the world ought to be, or how other people ought to be, or how certain people ought to be. When reality does not match our picture or when people do not meet our expectations, we become angry. We may become enraged or filled with hate. In those moments, we become addicted to the desire for control; we would like to take away the freedom of the other person. We would like the other person to be the way we want him or her to be.

If we look at situations where we are angry, we will see that we have lost our freedom to this feeling, to this emotion. We are enslaved not only to our negative emotion but also to our egocentric picture of how life and other people ought to be. The more attached we are to our little picture, the more resentful we become that life or others do not fit that picture. If we are to become free from the anger that poisons our soul, we need to be less egocentric and more Christ-centric.

The apostle Paul tells us that love casts out fear. And isn't fear at the root of all prejudice—the fear of someone who is different, the fear of someone's difference? Love requires freedom, the freedom to be our authentic selves in a relationship and also our deep commitment to the other person's quest, his/her/their freedom to be his/her/their authentic self. The more we become caught in fear, the more we will try to control, dominate, manipulate, enslave, or hurt others. This is not the life to which Jesus calls us. A prerequisite of love is freedom, both our freedom and the freedom of the other person, the person whom we love.

I love my children and my grandchildren. I want them to grow in ways that are physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually healthy. I want to protect them from harm. I want to spare them the consequences of stupid mistakes. But how far would I go to this end? If someone were to offer me access to a special computer that would program anything I wanted into my children's lives, into my grandchildren's lives, would I be tempted to do it? (That's a rhetorical question. Of course, I would be tempted to do it! I would, at the very least, make all of them New York Yankee fans!)

However, if I thought about it for a moment or two, *and especially if I prayed about it*, I would probably begin to see why I should pass up this tempting offer. I might realize that in programming my children or grandchildren's lives through this special computer, I would be playing God. Then I might even realize that if God wouldn't do this (*and God, who could do this, doesn't do this!*), why would I think of doing it?

As we join in the Sacrament of Holy Communion, let us think about those thoughts, feelings, attitudes, emotions, and especially those prejudices that enslave us, that take away our freedom to be the loving persons God wants us to be, and that also takes away the freedoms of our brothers and sisters. Let us remember the words of the apostle Paul:

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Paul tells us that we are called to a special kind of freedom. He tells us that through love we should become *enslaved* to Christ and each other. This is a long way from wanting others to be enslaved to us! Paul tells us that love casts out fear, that fear which leads to the abdication of our freedom and the desire to limit or take away the freedom of others. He offers us an alternative to our egocentric desire for control and power--a life centered in Christ.

Paul calls us forth into the freedom that comes to those who follow Christ. The fruit of discipleship is freedom from the negative emotions and negative behaviors that enslave us. The fruit of discipleship is the fruit of the Spirit: the feelings or behavior of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

On this Fourth of July weekend, let us celebrate freedom. Let us celebrate the freedom that is ours as Americans and the sacrifice of those who made this freedom possible. Let us remember those within our society and around the world who are not free and let us commit ourselves to work tirelessly for their liberation.

And let us also identify those negative feelings and emotions that enslave us, that take away the freedom to experience inner peace, and the ability to be in loving relationships with our brothers and sisters.

*A communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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