

Let Freedom Ring

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Kings 19:15-16, 19-21; Psalm 16;
Galatians 5:1, 13-25; Luke 9:51-52

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The fourth of July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress proclaimed our independence from Britain. A year later in 1777, in Bristol, Rhode Island, thirteen guns were fired, once at sunrise and again at sunset. In Philadelphia that year there was quite a celebration. There was a thirteen gun salute, a number of parades, a review of the troops and fireworks. The Continental Congress celebrated with an official dinner with toasts, music, speeches and prayers, and ships in the harbor were decorated with red, white, and blue bunting.

Why red, white, and blue? We don't know. Perhaps that was the only type of bunting available. Or was it a way of taking the British colors and showing them for a new purpose?

Finally, in 1782, the Congress of the Confederation chose red white and blue as the colors for the Great Seal of the United States. White, they proclaimed, stood for purity and innocence; red for valor and (I really like this) hardiness; and blue for vigilance, perseverance, and justice. The meaning the congress gave to those colors might well describe the characteristics of the American citizen and the freedom which we all cherish so dearly. For we live, do we not, in the land of the free and the home of the brave? We claim, do we not, to be one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all?

It is hardly surprising, given the backgrounds of the founding fathers and the beliefs of our early political leaders, that they should use words and ideals embodying the principal notions Paul expounds in his writing to the Galatians. Notice how boldly Paul expresses his understanding of Christian freedom at the beginning of the lesson we have just heard read.

Paul writes, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery". Here is the classic biblical expression on what it means to be free. Paul had good reason to write what he did to the Galatians. He was bent out of shape by what was happening in their infant faith community.

After Paul had been with them to get them started along came some Christians who, before becoming Christians, had been faithful Jews. They began to teach the Galatians, all of whom were Gentiles, that to be a faithful Christian one had to follow Jewish traditions, and especially the rite of circumcision.

Paul was outraged. He immediately attacked such legalistic notions as being seen as some sort of preliminary requirement, or worse being seen as a requirement at all, to becoming or being a

faithful Christian. Hence his declaration that Christ sets us free from the Law. It is not that Christ does away with the law, it remains, it is those who follow Christ are set free from it.

But there is a problem. Such an understanding of freedom can easily be misunderstood and abused, and it certainly is not the sort of freedom understood in our current day and age. These days freedom is popularly understood to be autonomy, independence, doing as we please, and saying whatever we want in whichever way we please. In such an atmosphere it is hardly surprising that if someone wants to build a campfire, cook hotdogs and s'mores and relax and enjoy the outdoors, they should go ahead and do that – even when it is illegal to do so. Why they are just exercising their freedom, they are not doing any harm, what they are doing is innocent enough.

But what followed from just such a exercise of freedom was the Lake Tahoe fire which yesterday had left over two hundred homes destroyed, 30,000 people evacuated and thirty-one hundred acres burned and scorched. Though the fire is now under control, those who first set up the camp fire will be held accountable to the law, will be convicted, and punished accordingly. That is the way the law functions.

God's law is no different. We are used to thinking that when the law is broken there should be a fair and just punishment, so law breaking is punished in a variety of ways. People then often think that breaking God's law, committing sin we call it, is like our human law. Some sins, we like to think, are worse than others. But in God's eyes this is not so, any and every sin, every instance where God's law is broken is deserving of only one punishment. Does anyone know what that is? That's right: death!

To hear it put that way means that we haven't a hope, because all of us have committed sin. In fact, we open our service quoting 1 John – “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”. And we confess that “we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves.” But it is precisely from sin and its consequence, death, that Christ has set us free. So what is this freedom?

Let us look at what Paul is saying. First, Paul wants us to understand that the freedom about which he writes is not just freedom, it is freedom IN CHRIST since it is by God, in and through Christ, that we are set free. Such liberation carries with it an enormous cost – the life of Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, which leaves us with an obligation. How can we respond to such grace?

We are called to follow in His footsteps, to live as children of God, as disciples of Christ. And that is spelled out for us by Jesus Himself, when He is asked what is the most important commandment of all. He answers, there are two: We are to love God with all our heart and with all our mind and with all our soul. That means our time, the gifts or talents we have, and our money are His. But grace upon grace, out of the depths of His love for us he allows us to retain 90% for ourselves. We are obliged to return to God one tenth, the tithe, of our time and talent and treasure.

Second, not only are we obligated to Christ, we are obligated to one another – we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are to do unto others what we would have others do to us! All of which we are called to do for Christ’s sake. This, says Paul in words offensive to modern Christian ears, is like being enslaved. We have been set free to be slaves of Christ. In bondage to Him. In a sense, it is a matter of choice.

There are other forms of bondage in the world, are there not? The question is, in what ways are we bound in the service of the world? And then there is a choice: the way of the world and bondage, or the way of discipleship and freedom. Precisely because freedom can be misunderstood and abused, Paul turns to the question of how one lives in this space *between* the law and license (that is, freedom understood as autonomy). How is it possible to live as one ought without the security of the law? We are to live, says Paul, by the spirit. Such living has certain recognizable characteristics, not rules – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Paul’s radical insight is that those who belong to Christ belong to Him completely and can no longer belong to the law or to sin. But then, isn’t that just the way it is for us as citizens of the United States? We are called to serve country under God. To live with the characteristics of American citizenship with purity and innocence, with valor and hardiness, with vigilance, perseverance and justice.

This Fourth of July, let us give thanks for the blessings bestowed upon us and our nation, and let us embody the characteristics of good citizenship in our daily living. But, let us also celebrate and give thanks for the freedom won for us in and through Christ and let our lives be marked by the characteristics of freedom in Christ. And that, beloved, that is something to celebrate.

Amen.