

Free to Be You and Me

A Sermon Preached by the
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Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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Deuteronomy 10:12-13, 17-21
Galatians 5:13-15

In the middle of the first century, the Apostle Paul wrote those words to the churches at Galatia, "For freedom Christ has set us free . . . for you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence."

Seventeen hundred years later, the Continental Congress declared the separation of the thirteen American colonies from Great Britain, with these words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."¹

Some two hundred years after that, on May 21, 1944, weeks before the Invasion of Normandy, with the Second World War still raging in Europe, the famed American judge, Learned Hand, stood before thousands of people in Central Park for the "I Am an American Day" ceremony, where newly naturalized citizens joined in the Pledge of Allegiance. In his brief remarks, he said, "We sought liberty; freedom from oppression, freedom from want, freedom to be ourselves."

And then he went on to say, "What then is the spirit of liberty? I cannot define it; I can only tell you my own faith. The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the mind of other men and women; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which weighs their interests alongside its own without bias; the spirit of liberty remembers that not even a sparrow falls to earth unheeded; the spirit of liberty is the spirit of Him who, near two thousand years ago, taught mankind that lesson it has never learned but never quite forgotten; that there may be a kingdom where the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest."²

This is the weekend that we celebrate that spirit of liberty, that freedom, that which defines us as a nation and as citizens of that nation. It is what we fought for, what we have defended and what we believe should be the standard for every human being. We know what we are free from, and we know what we are free to do. We believe ourselves entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. How tragic that, in this great nation, too many among us are still in captivity to racism, homophobia, sexism, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, unemployment, welfare, violence and addiction? How sad that too many among us have no hope that "the least shall be heard and considered side by side with the greatest"?

Freedom is also what defines us as a religious group. We are part of what the Oxford English Dictionary calls "the Christian churches or bodies which repudiated the papal authority, and separated or were severed from the Roman communion in the Reformation of the sixteenth century." We were the ones who protested Roman authority, the Protestants. More specifically,

¹ The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776

² Learned Hand, *The Spirit of Liberty*, May 21, 1944.

as Presbyterians, our roots are deep in the traditions of Zwingli and Calvin and Knox, and from those reformed roots grew a Presbyterian presence in this country as early as 1659, with the first Presbytery established in 1706. But church history isn't the point here. The point is that we expect to be able to worship whenever and wherever we choose, to express our faith in a variety of ways, to have the freedom to question and debate and express doubt.

We have found, of course, that in both our secular lives and our religious lives, freedom is not an absolute. We are required to exercise some responsibility and balance to guarantee that the freedom of one doesn't cancel the freedom of another. We have learned that just because we have the ability to behave in a certain way doesn't necessarily mean that we should. We have learned that freedom requires safeguards to protect the earth and its environment and boundaries to protect the vulnerable among us. We have also learned that just because we know these things doesn't mean that we honor them. As Paul points out to the churches at Galatia, just because they are free from the letter of the law doesn't mean that they are not bound by something deeper and more profound in the spirit of the law.

Christian freedom, the way Paul states it in the first verse of our passage from Galatians, both overlaps with and differs sharply from the many expressions of freedom that we embrace. For example, for many of us, freedom means having options, being gifted with a variety of choices whether at the ballot box or in the grocery store, it means being allowed to choose what career we will pursue, what we will read, where we will worship and whom we will marry. But, of course, human choices are never entirely free. We are conditioned by a multitude of factors - everything from heredity and culture to environment and the media. Paul's understanding of freedom is much more radical than the simple possibility of choice. For Paul, freedom comes not in human choices but in divine choice, in God's choosing us and in our faithful and obedient response.

When Paul writes, "Christ has set us free," he means that God's decisive salvation has been accomplished and a complete change of allegiances is expected. We are not simply set free to make our way in the world unfettered by any control. As one writer puts it, "At the exodus and more crucially in Christ a deliverance happens which by its very nature is a transference from one dominion to another, with the remarkable result that the new bondage is perfect freedom." In other words, we are set free to be in the service of God.

What does it mean to be called to freedom, to be set free in this new and radical way? I think we are invited first of all to consider the reasons for our ministry, to remember in whose name we act. Someone has said, "The liberating work of Christ becomes the condition on which all else depends; without it, Christian ethics cease to be Christian."

There is no question that a person can live a decent life, work on behalf of the poor and oppressed, refrain from destructive behaviors, participate in extravagant acts of kindness and sacrifice and not be Christian. There is nothing to say that only Christians are known to behave in such ways. But believing ourselves called to freedom means that our focus shifts away from ourselves and our achievements. We stop focusing our attention on what we might gain and start paying attention to the relationships that are being built as a result of our efforts. We pay less attention to the expected response, we don't count the cost and we don't spend time and energy continually taking stock to see if our efforts have been rewarded, if enough money has been pledged or enough service rendered.

And that's not easy to do! You mean I'm expected to devote all this time and energy and maybe even my hard-earned money to a given task and not wonder what the payoff will be? Where

does it say that? Well, remember Galatians? "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another." It is not possible to talk about Christian freedom without also talking about the commandment to serve. It is not possible to talk about Christian freedom without also remembering in whose name we serve.

And that's just the beginning! It gets a whole lot more complicated from there. "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" If we take that commandment seriously - and if we don't, perhaps we should - we are in for some extraordinary attitude adjustments. It assumes, first of all, that we understand love to be more than just warm feelings or moments of tenderness. It understands love as a radical act, not just one virtue on a list of virtues, but the sum and substance of what it means to be a follower of the One whose love always asks more of us. Love is concrete and substantial self-giving, it bears one another's burdens, and it demands justice for all.

It also assumes that we can't choose our neighbor. After all, loving our neighbor wouldn't be nearly so difficult, if we could decide whom we would put in that category. But remember the passage from Deuteronomy: "You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

There may be times when it is difficult to determine exactly what love demands, but there is never a time when the commandment can simply be set aside, never a time when we are obliged to do something less. When Paul told the Galatians that they were called to freedom and expected to love one another, it was with the understanding that freedom was the basis for love, and love was the proper exercise of freedom.

It sometimes seems that we are so intent upon preserving our freedom that we forget to love our neighbor. It's so easy to focus on our individual rights and ignore the rights of the community. We have forgotten how much love it takes to live in community, to think of somebody else's welfare, to put other's needs before our own, sometimes to simply be courteous. How remarkable it might be if we were to take the command to love our neighbor as seriously as Paul expected the churches at Galatia to respond. If we love our neighbor, we think about the greater good, and that's not easy to do in this 21st century American culture. Too many things get in the way, not the least of which is greed, selfishness, and fear.

Yesterday afternoon I went to see the new movie "Kit Kitteridge: An American Girl." If you have daughters or granddaughters with American Girl dolls, you know who Kit Kitteridge is. If you don't, look around - someone near you is nodding their head and you can ask later! I wasn't expecting deep and profound. I was expecting entertainment. And I was surprised that I got both. The story is set in 1934, during the Depression, and the similarities to what some in this country are facing today is striking. Home foreclosures, with a family's possessions out on the street; soup kitchens, unemployment, communities of hobos, not unlike the homeless that live under the bridges here.

My point is that here is a movie that could have been sappy and nostalgic, but which was really quite touching, with a remarkable message about loving our neighbor. Not a moment of violence, not one word that I could not repeat in the pulpit, and because it won't make a gazillion dollars, it will be labeled a children's movie and have a limited run.

I'm not being critical of anyone else's taste in movies; I realize that I'm kind of an old fud. But it started me thinking about this: just because we are able to produce entertainment with excessive violence and unprintable language - movies, music, internet games, pornography -

entertainment that produces revenues in the billions of dollars, does that mean we should continue to do so? Should we not, instead, love our neighbors, our children, more than that?

Just because I am able to purchase a powerful handgun or a semi-automatic weapon, does it mean that I should, even if I am putting my own family or my community at greater risk? Should I not think first of the number of neighbors killed in drive-by shootings or gang violence by guns that were too easily accessible in the first place?

Just because my neighbor is unwilling to call the police, should I stand by while she is beaten in another domestic assault just because I would interfere with her freedom to choose? If I love my neighbor as myself, shouldn't I take that risk? What then is the spirit of liberty?

On Friday, as I was reading the account of the covert operation to rescue the hostages in Colombia, I was struck, as we probably all were, with the descriptions of life in captivity: chained by the neck to a post, forced to march without shoes, injuries, illness, cruelty; and by what Ingrid Betancourt said of their release, "It's like being born again."

One pastor has suggested that "in every generation there needs to be a rebirth of freedom, and a rebirth of what freedom means for that generation." He goes on to say, "We hold these truths to be self evident that all people are created equal, that all people are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, rights that cannot be taken away from them, and among these God given rights are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those are incredible visions that need to find new meaning in every generation."³

Jesus said, "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. Do these things and you shall live." If you are bound to God in love, bound to your neighbor in service, bound tightly and passionately to both, you shall be free – free to be the kind of person God intended you to be.

For we are called to freedom, brothers and sisters. . . to love our neighbors as ourselves. . . to live by the Spirit. Paul goes on to remind us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Thanks be to God for setting us free to love one another. May we always hold that truth to be self-evident. Amen.

³ Edward F. Markquart, Grace Lutheran Church, Des Moines, Washington.